

The Complexities of Farce

(With a Case Study on *Fawlty Towers*)

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Abstract

This thesis will counter the argument that farce is a simplistic dramatic form low in the theatrical hierarchy and demonstrate that it is both complex and multifaceted. It will be shown to have a long history and to have influenced many different dramatic forms. The thesis is in two sections. The first will explore farce in general, and the second will use the sitcom *Fawlty Towers* as a case study in order to explore the televisual mode and its relevance to the contemporary context. The question “What is farce?” will be answered in detail, thus developing an unambiguous perception of the genre which will form a contextual basis for the rest of the thesis. Recurring themes will be used to link chapters together and certain issues raised in early chapters will be expanded upon in later ones. A key aspect to be taken into consideration is the importance the physical plays in farce. Thus, my focus will be specifically on performance texts, and not limit itself to the “literary” texts.

The theatrical hierarchy will be addressed directly, exploring why and how the genre has been delegated to the lowest rung of the hierarchical ladder. Such a classification will be destabilised and shown to be unfounded because it is based on such assumptions as tragedy being the “best” genre because it is tragedy, and farce the worst because it is farce. The conclusions made in this section will then be demonstrated by approaching farce in a more oblique manner through an exploration of *Commedia dell'Arte* and Medieval Carnival. This will reveal the extent to which farce and/or its techniques have manifested themselves.

Fawlty Towers will be introduced to determine how farce has translated to the televisual medium. *Fawlty Towers* is useful because, unlike the “literary texts” studied

earlier, its recordings provide visual/aural examples which are more practical in exploring farce's physical characteristics. The farcical aspects of Commedia and Carnival will be re-explored to show how they have evolved and manifested themselves in the sitcom form.

Integral to the thesis is a study on laughter. Various laughter theories will be studied in relation to *Fawlty Towers* to establish that, like farce, laughter is also a complicated subject matter worthy of study. Through association, farce is shown to be even more complex. The thesis concludes with an analysis of the *Fawlty Towers* performance text to illustrate farce's multifaceted nature, and that it can, and should, be taken "seriously". The series' "closed world" will be examined to discover how it ideally suits the farcical paradigm. Then, using Victorian beliefs and ethics as a contextual base, I explore how farce parodies this outdated value system as it is played out – anachronistically – through the character of Basil Fawlty. The thesis terminates with a brief conclusion summing up what was analysed, while affirming that the premise proposed in the introduction has been achieved.

For Megan

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Introduction

What is farce? Here are six definitions: *The Macquarie Dictionary*: “A light, humorous play in which the plot depends upon situation rather than character”.¹ *The Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary*: “a coarsely comic dramatic work based on ludicrously improbable events”.² *The Australian Oxford Dictionary*: “a comic dramatic work using buffoonery and horseplay and often including crude characterisation and improbable situations”.³ The *BBC English Dictionary*: “a humorous play in which the characters become involved in unlikely and complicated situations”.⁴ *The Oxford English Dictionary*: “a dramatic work (usually short) which has for its sole object to excite laughter”.⁵ And, *The Collins Softback English Dictionary*: “a broadly humorous play based on the exploitation of improbable situations”.⁶ While dictionary definitions are by necessity concise and reductive, such simplistic descriptions may imply triviality and unimportance. Ironically, barring a number of similarities, each definition highlights a different aspect of the genre, indicating that it is much richer than may appear at first glance. Thus, the objective of this thesis is to demonstrate – through exposition – that farce is neither unsophisticated nor unrefined, but, rather, a complex and multi-faceted genre in its own right with distinct characteristics, and eminently worthy of analysis.

Chapters one and two will present a detailed, and yet wide-ranging, exploration of farce, demonstrating that it not only embraces a wide range of characteristics, but also has an ability to manifest itself in a variety of different forms. I do not intend that the texts studied in chapters one and two will prove to be an exhaustive compilation of farcical works – nor a chronological history of the genre – but they will fall mainly into two categories: those deemed “a farce” and those with farcical characteristics. As will

be demonstrated, farce has been placed very low in the theatrical hierarchy, particularly because of its emphasis on the physical side of performance. However, it is precisely its physical aspect which will be used to demonstrate that such denigration is without merit as, rather than simplifying, it enhances the genre. An ongoing theme will comprise of an exploration of the differences between farce and comedy, with the latter being defined the more “literary” because of its believed reliance on the “verbal”. (Nonetheless, because of individual differences in interpretation, the distinction between them necessarily becomes blurred.) Each chapter will build on the previous by either expanding on what was said before or using the previous information to develop its own line of argument focusing on a specific subject or theme. Also, there are numerous instances where a premise or topic is only referred to briefly in one part of the thesis because of its pertinence later. The reader will be informed, either in the main body of the thesis or in the endnotes, that there will be a more detailed exploration of that topic to follow.

The final three chapters will become more specific and focus almost exclusively upon the series *Fawlty Towers*. Initially, this particular series was chosen because, to my knowledge, this would be the first scholarly work to take a comprehensive look at how *Fawlty Towers* functions as a farcical sitcom, or situation comedy. *Fawlty Towers* is also of a manageable size, and comprises of only two series with six episodes in each, with both having been filmed within a relatively compact historical context – the decade of 1970’s. Its six-hour running time results in a conveniently sized series which will permit me to go into some detail. At the same time, it contains a greater range of farcical techniques than would be available for analysis in a single two-hour play. *Fawlty Towers* is further self-contained by being written by the same authors – John Cleese and Connie Booth – and having the regular characters played by the same actors.

This ensures conformity of style with the characters having defined roles and predictable reactions. And, by being in possession of a visual recording for each episode, I can explore the physicality of this farce first-hand, rather than having to envisage it solely from the written text. (This will also bring into consideration how the televisual medium affects farce's production and reception.) Furthermore, in it having been filmed in front of a studio audience suggests that – as with a stage farce – the actors would have been influenced by spectator participation, and thus, the barrier between actor and audience member would have been narrowed. (The importance of spectator participation will be made clear in chapter two.) Finally, *Fawlty Towers* is described by Garry Berman as an “instant classic” which has gained “universal” acclaim over the years and become a “comedy milestone”.⁷ According to Berman, “it has become the unofficial measuring stick against which later farcical sitcoms have been judged”.⁸

Chapter one begins with a detailed study of generic labels and their usefulness in assisting in the understanding of the various genres. This will convey the difficulties involved in not only defining generic categories, but also deciding which characteristics belong to each specific genre. This leads to the chapter's main purpose: to provide the primary defining characteristics of farce – by my criteria. In particular, the differences between comedy and farce will be explored, and will remain an ongoing theme throughout the thesis. A difficulty which arises when exploring these two genres is that at times their characteristics will necessarily become blurred. This can be alleviated by contextualising each text being examined. To this end, books by Jessica Milner Davis, Stuart E. Baker and, in particular, Albert Bermel will act as this chapter's core texts in order to provide a firm contextual basis for the entire thesis.⁹ Through the studies carried out by these authors, farcical sub-genres will be established while demonstrating

the working of those characteristics which are considered “farcical”. (In particular, farce’s “unreality” will be explored.) The chapter will conclude with a specific look at the physical and verbal in performance which will then be expanded upon in chapter two.

The second chapter is divided into three sections, the overall objective of which is to challenge the preconceived notion that farce is an inferior dramatic form. Section one confronts this belief directly by destabilising farce’s low position in the theatrical hierarchy. It does this by exploring the reasons for its positioning through questioning its relationships to those twin cultural icons – tragedy and William Shakespeare – which leads me into considering how Shakespeare utilised farce in his plays. Furthermore, throughout this section the merits of analysing the “literary”, or written, text will be evaluated against the study of the “performance text”. Incorporating an analysis of the latter is far more useful because, in being inclusive of the literary text, it allows an analysis of farce in performance which can potentially offer new methods of reading the genre. This ends with a brief look at the physical in performance before moving on to the next section, the focus of which is *Commedia dell’Arte*. The detailed exploration of *Commedia* may initially seem almost tangential. However, by concentrating on this “non-literary” – and very physical – performance style, I will be able to demonstrate the level of sophistication farce can achieve in a specific theatrical form. The discussion will then shift to *Commedia*’s influence on the farces of Molière, Carlo Goldoni and Shakespeare to further connect it to those characteristics which are considered “farcical”, and conclude with a study of the influence of the actor on the performance text. The final section will explore the relationship between farce and Medieval Carnival. Through the work of Mikhail Bakhtin I will explore the hierarchical freedom European Medieval communities experienced in the carnival atmosphere. The visual

and aural spectacles of the middle ages were events of relative unreality as social barriers were either brought down or reversed. In an atmosphere of freedom, taboo subjects were ridiculed and made to seem grotesque. Thus, this section will expand upon numerous farcical issues outlined in chapter one, particularly in regards to unreality and role reversal.

Chapter three will then concentrate on providing a detailed study of *Fawlty Towers*. The series will be contextualised firstly by providing background information on the series' creation, influences and structure, and then through an exploration of the sitcom style. The latter is particularly important because, as demonstrated, *Fawlty Towers*' sitcom structure will affect the analysis of the series. This is then followed by a study of how the series functions as farce by using it to re-examine many farcical traits described in chapter one. Character physicality and plot structure in particular will be taken into consideration. The chapter will conclude with an analysis of Commedia's manifestation in *Fawlty Towers* and how the grotesque is used effectively in the series. These final two sections are important in demonstrating the endurance of farcical characteristics over time.

As will be established, laughter is a vitally important aspect of farce and any discussion on the genre would be incomplete without developing an understanding of its workings. In the previous three chapters there are instances when I mention how an audience might react to a farcical situation. However, it is only in chapter four that I will tackle the "how", "when" and "why" of laughter. Three contextual bases will be taken into consideration. The first is the context of the individual, which will permit the exploration of how the individual interprets the humour in farce and then responds to it with laughter. Secondly, there is the context of the shared event which entails

examining how the sound and/or presence of other laughers can encourage laughter in an individual. Finally, I will explore how the farcical form is constructed in such a way as to prompt laughter. The laughter theories used to understand the how and why of laughter fall into three groups: physiological, psychological and philosophical. The first explore the laughter reaction itself and how the body behaves when laughing. The second group mainly discuss what it is which makes one laugh, and the third group attempt to answer why. As this is a literary thesis and not a scientific one, unless otherwise stated, the evaluation of each theory is based on my own judgment of that theory. For example, although the theories postulated by Sigmund Freud and other psychoanalysts are technically in the psychology field I have placed them in the philosophical section because, for this thesis, I have limited the psychological approaches to those which involve the collection and analysis of empirical data. Furthermore, as this thesis is primarily on farce – and not laughter – I have been necessarily selective in my choice of theories. Extracts taken from *Fawlty Towers* will be analysed using the chosen theories to clarify how they work in practice. Indirectly, this will once more demonstrate the complexities of farce by highlighting how one of its principle characteristics – laughter – is an important aspect of the genre.

Chapter five will further advance the argument that farce is in no way an inferior theatrical form by providing an analysis of the *Fawlty Towers* performance text. Divided into three sections, the first will examine the “world” of *Fawlty Tower* to explain why it functions well as a farcical sitcom. In addition, three of the series’ “regulars” will be analysed to discover how this “world” has shaped them to produce multi-dimensional personalities which would allow them to behave in a predictable manner. The final two sections – the first on stereotypes and the second on social hierarchy – stem from those chapter two discussions on commedia and medieval

carnival involving the creation of “types” in the former and the destabilisation of the hierarchy in the latter. I will be using the Anglophilic, anachronistic Victorian behaviour of the lead character Basil Fawlty as my contextual basis to demonstrate how the farcical form of *Fawlty Towers* parodies outmoded Victorian beliefs and values. The conclusion shall be a summation of the material of the previous five chapters, drawing together the various strands to reinforce the thesis’s argument for the complexities of farce, and the enduring power of its entertainment value.

Chapter 1

“Farce” is a generic label designed to encapsulate the characteristics of a dramatic work into a single “user friendly” word. In practice, the experiences and preferences of every individual convey a variety of both positive and negative connotations, insinuations and interpretations to such a label. As suggested by Heather Dubrow, a genre may also be culturally specific.¹ For example, it can be argued that a modern audience might describe Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* as a tragicomedy, as its storyline combines tragic events with a joyous ending. On the other hand, Kenneth McLeish states that the Ancient Greeks would have found the term “tragicomedy” an alien one, as they considered any play with a “happy ending” a comedy.² Any form of labelling is problematic as it can constrain and limit a play. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Leslie Smith, “genre helps create the contract between reader or spectator and writer”,³ with the “audience” developing expectations pertaining to the genre encountered. For Dubrow, if an audience were experiencing a naturalistic drawing-room murder mystery, it would “feel betrayed” if, at its conclusion, the murderer were revealed to be supernatural.⁴ Furthermore, the audience’s “annoyance would stem not from the fact that the writer had violated the laws of nature but rather that he [*sic*] had violated those of the code”.⁵

However, Jonathan Culler proposes that genre-specific conventions might be subverted if an author were to work against them: once a contextual base has been established, the “failure to keep a promise is made possible by the institution of promising”.⁶ For example, Tom Stoppard’s *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968) parodies Agatha Christie-style murder mysteries by exaggerating that genre’s conventions. *Hound* is a play-within-a-play which is set in “as realistic an idiom as possible”.⁷ In this

play, hyperrealism is mocked when Mrs Drudge takes an inordinate amount of time serving tea. Then the critic Birdboot – sitting watching the play – says, “The second act, however, fails to fulfil the promise”.⁸ This statement criticises pushing realism to unnecessary extremes, in an effort to make it completely “life-like” by needlessly slowing down the action with monotonous, pointless repetition. Melodrama in Agatha Christie-type plays is also parodied with such lines as, “I’ll kill anyone who comes between us”,⁹ and “Well, I think I’ll go and oil my gun”.¹⁰ In conclusion, generic manipulation results in one of three responses to the written or performance text. Firstly, a text “fails” by not realising the demands of its genre. Secondly, the “rule breaking” generates a statement on a particular subject and/or aspect of that genre. Finally, depending on the number of “rules” broken, the text is construed as belonging to a different genre. However, as demonstrated by the above example from Stoppard, one must be familiar with the “rules” to understand if, or how, they are being manipulated. Hence, because of cultural and individual differences, generic classification remains arbitrary and open to interpretation. Nevertheless, without it the study of drama – in this case – would become a sprawling disarray of innumerable, and unmanageable, concepts.

The organisation of generic classifications is as complex as determining the characteristics of a single genre. For example, one theory may portray comedy and farce as distinct genres, while another may describe farce as a sub-genre of comedy. A theorist would then develop a list of reasons which would substantiate his/her chosen theory. The resulting definition – be it broad or narrow – must, according to Bermel, then be defended by either refuting other theories and definitions, finding excuses for exceptions, and/or constantly altering the definition to fit the new theories.¹¹ Bermel’s claim that he has avoided this problem by not developing a definition is not entirely

accurate. By writing on farce he has automatically restricted it to his point of view. There is no “perfect” theory. If there were, there would not be any generic contentions and all “rules” would be clear-cut and incontestable. Even the parameters developed for tragedy by Aristotle in *The Poetics* are open to interpretation. These include the leading character having a tragic flaw which causes his/her downfall; having all the action occur in one day and told in one place within one story; and there being an element of catharsis, or “purification”.¹² Fintan O’Toole asserts that sixteenth and seventeenth-century Italian and French scholars turned Aristotle’s writings into a formula which in France “became a prescription” for all tragedies.¹³ On the other hand, Shakespeare either ignores or had little first-hand knowledge of Aristotle. As pointed out by O’Toole, it was only in the Victorian era that Shakespeare’s tragedies were forced into an Aristotelian mould, particularly in regard to the idea of the tragic flaw.¹⁴ For example, Hamlet’s presumed tragic flaw is one of indecisiveness. If he had killed Claudius earlier in the play, he would still be alive at its conclusion. However, from an Elizabethan point of view, there is no tragic flaw. *Hamlet* is a revenge play which, necessarily, has its own set of rules. According to David L. Hirst, the revenge is governed by “two contradictory codes, the demands for revenge and the Christian ethic”.¹⁵ Without these two opposing forces, the revenge would take place in scene one, and there would be no play. In *Hamlet*, a ghost claiming to be Hamlet’s father informs Hamlet that Claudius had murdered him. An Elizabethan would suspect the ghost to be a demon, deceiving Hamlet into murdering an innocent man, thus condemning him to everlasting damnation. Therefore, Hamlet is not indecisive, but laudably amassing evidence before avenging his father.¹⁶ Such an interpretation violates Aristotle’s system, confirming it as theory, not fact.

Even with a set of “rules” in place it is impossible to develop an all-encompassing theory for any genre. The individual chooses which theory seems the more “sensible”, or which one he/she prefers. For example, both Bermel and Eric Bentley subdivide drama into four genres: farce, comedy, melodrama and tragedy.¹⁷ One could go further and condense drama down to only comedy and tragedy. Or, even more simplistically, the two theatrical masks: plays which cause tears (sad mask), and plays which bring about laughter (smiling mask). However, such a classification is too broad, and one is left with the task of “fitting in” the myriad sub-genres. Furthermore, the masks represent emotions, and if they were considered to be the two “extremes” of a linear system, this would make it difficult to categorise the many other human emotions. Therefore, this thesis will employ the more specific Bermel and Bentley breakdown which is quite comprehensive and permits the conceptualisation of the theatrical genres. However, when a genre is set up against another, the result is a binary. Although binaries are constructions which have little to do with reality, farce must be set up against the other genres clearly and simply in order to be able to delineate its characteristics and concepts. I am not suggesting that all “farcical” features must exist simultaneously in every farce, nor will one farce be considered superior to another because it contains more of these characteristics. Indeed, a farce might “borrow” characteristics or elements “belonging” to another genre. As Bermel points out, “no genre sustains itself consistently through a work”.¹⁸ He provides a useful analogy: the theatrical genres are four large continents divided into various countries, states, provinces and kingdoms, each representing a different aspect of the genre. Borders are insubstantial and move, expanding and contracting to either include or exclude certain areas as the continents combine to form “new” genres, or borrow ideas, styles and forms. Those continents are multidimensional, “without fixed definition or domain and never at rest, drifting together and apart, colliding and infringing on one another,

combining their individual qualities without surrendering them”.¹⁹ In other words, if tragedy is blue and comedy yellow, a tragicomedy is not green, “but yellow with blue added”²⁰ as particular characteristics will be identified as being “traditionally” tragic and others “traditionally” comic. Therefore, if a play is classed as a farce, the overwhelming majority of its characteristics are farcical.²¹ My exploration of farce shall begin by initially comparing the genre to its (apparently) closest relative, comedy.²²

Farce and comedy are invariably strongly linked. Milly S. Barranger argues that farce derives from comedy.²³ The *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama* describes farce as an “exaggerated form of comedy”.²⁴ Davis states that farce is “broad, physical, visual comedy ... comedy which is slapstick”.²⁵ In contrast, Bermel offers a set of indicators to assist in distinguishing between the two and perceiving them as distinct genres.²⁶ For Bermel, comedy relies predominantly on wit, and farce on humour, and whereas wit is generally verbal, humour is visual.²⁷ In addition, wit implies knowledge, or character self-reflexivity. Therefore, when watching a comedy an audience tends to laugh with the characters, whilst with farce, an audience laughs at them.²⁸ Furthermore, if a theatrical work is “normal” or “lifelike” it is comedy and if it is abnormal or unreal it is farce.²⁹ Bermel states that,

Farce specializes in making circumstances that are normal for some characters abnormal for others, or that in comedy characters remain rooted in reality while in farce they keep venturing out of reality. And they often do so in everyday settings.³⁰

The final ingredient is the performance: a comedian will play the character, and a farceur the situation.³¹ However, the ever-shifting “continents”, prevent these points from ever being clear cut and completely exact. Bermel describes them as being “unreliable”³² – what is comedy to one person may be farce to another. Nonetheless, as inferred earlier, without “markers” it would be impossible to classify and explore farce in any depth. A scene or line might contain a combination of both humorous and witty

characteristics. However, if it is described as farcical it is because, after careful analysis, I have deemed it so.

When comparing farce with comedy, a scholar could misguidedly consider only the visual/verbal dichotomy of the two genres. Therefore, in order to fully explore Bermel's points I shall commence by discerning performance information from the written text. Aristophanes' plays are ideal because, as David Taylor states, there is little direct written evidence on Ancient Greek theatre practices and the bulk of the information must be gleaned from the stylised images of actors in performance depicted on ancient vases and sculptures.³³ As F. H. Sandbach points out,

To say that we possess eleven plays by Aristophanes, the Athenian writer of comedies, is a half-truth. We have the words of eleven plays. But the text is not the play. The play was a single performance in the theatre at Athens, spoken and acted by costumed actors and in part sung by a chorus of dancers to the music of a piper ... The experience of that original audience cannot be recaptured; the melodies they heard are lost forever, and many of the jokes need explanation, which may give understanding, but does not encourage laughter.³⁴

Nevertheless, much can be discovered from the opening dialogue of *The Frogs*, for example, where both verbal wit and verbal humour are present. The god Dionysus arrives at Heracles' house to enquire how one can descend into Hades in order to acquire a poet. On being asked why, Dionysus answers: "I need a poet who can *write*. There are only two kinds of poet nowadays, the slick and the dead".³⁵ Dionysus' joke is that as there are no good poets left on earth, he is forced to go down to Hades to find one. This is verbal wit. Dionysus' statement is comical because the reader or spectator is encouraged to laugh at his joke and not at him. A few lines down verbal humour is encountered:

DIONYSUS: But come to the point – I see you're looking at my lion-skin. Well, I took the liberty, seeing that you travelled in those parts when you went down after Cerberus – well, I wondered if perhaps you could give me a few tips: any useful contacts down there, where you get the boat, which are the best eating-houses, bread shops, wine shops, knocking shops ... And which places have the fewest bugs.³⁶

Context makes this speech farcical. One laughs at Dionysus because of the information he is after. He is not interested in the dangers inherent in such a journey, but rather in those localities which will make his expedition more bearable. When compared to Euripides' incarnation of Dionysus in *The Bacchai* – a harsh, vengeful god ready to crush anyone who denies his divinity and refuses him worship – Aristophanes' creation becomes ludicrous. Within this context Dionysus has been reduced from being an all-powerful god to a human-like individual. And, his enquiring after the best restaurants and brothels subverts the perils of a trip to Hades, transforming it into a vacation.

Visual humour is concurrently present in the acting space as suggested by the following passage, occurring after Dionysus knocks on Heracles' front door:

HERACLES: [*within*]: Ho, ho, who smites my door? Some Centaur, doubtless.
[*The door opens, and HERACLES himself appears. He stares in amazement at DIONYSUS.*]
What ... Who ...?
[*In a convulsion of mirth and amazement he collapses to the ground.*]
DIONYSUS: There, did you notice?
XANTHIAS: Notice what?
DIONYSUS: How I frightened him.
XANTHIAS: Mistook you for a madman, I expect sir.
HERACLES: Oh, by Demeter, I can't stop laughing. [*He struggles to his feet and retires into the house.*]
DIONYSUS: Come back a minute, old boy, there's something I want to ask you.
HERACLES [*returning*]: Sorry, old man, but really I can't help it. A lion-skin over a yellow nightdress! What's the idea? Why the buskins? Why the club? What's your regiment?³⁷

Although the stage directions would have been added later to interpret the scene visually,³⁸ it is clear from Heracles' reaction and words that Dionysus is dressed in a humorous fashion. To the Ancient Greeks, Heracles was a famous – and invincible – warrior, yet in the play he lives in a city house as a human. Dionysus, the patron god of the theatre, is given a servant and a humble donkey. Furthermore, his ridiculous outfit is a caricature of that worn by Heracles during his “original” journey to Hades. Their appearances further parody the gods of Greek tragedy. Indeed, Heracles, whom one would expect to be very strong and fit, has now grown older and gained a little weight.

Even outside an historical context, such an incongruous outfit would most probably cause laughter, and Heracles' reaction would focus attention on it, inciting further laughter.

Nonetheless, the division between comedy and farce is not as clear-cut and, as Bermel proposes, there are many "borderline cases".³⁹ Bermel argues that wit can be directed at individuals, professions and institutions, but a character is witty only if drawn as a wit.⁴⁰ One example he provides is the following from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895):

ALGERNON: Oh! It is absurd to have a hard and fast rule about what one should read and what one shouldn't. More than half of modern culture depends on what one shouldn't read.

JACK: I am quite aware of the fact, and I don't propose to discuss modern culture. It isn't the sort of thing one should discuss in private. I simply want my cigarette case back.⁴¹

To understand how farce and comedy work in this quotation, it must be contextualised. As pointed out by Richard Allen Cave, the Victorian era was rife with both overt and subtle censorship. The Lord Chamberlain had the duty of censoring plays with inappropriate features, and certain bookstores refused to sell texts deemed unsuitable for public use.⁴² Therefore, Algernon's comment could be seen as a critique of Victorian censorship, which, as he implies, is unable to fully prevent people from reading what is considered improper. With this line, Algernon cannot be seen as a humorous character because – as highlighted by Bermel – he is commenting on issues not directly related to him. With Jack, things are different. Bermel states that what he says is witty, but to assume that, one must presume that he, like Algernon, is a wit. Within the context of Victorian censorship – and Algernon's last line – Jack's comment that modern culture is not "the sort of thing" that should be discussed in private, implies that modern culture is a public domain rather than a private one. The comment becomes a witty remark against the socially ingrained strict mores of that society which insisted on deciding what was suitable and unsuitable and forced public censorship into the private domain.

On the other hand, as Algernon is discussing modern culture, Jack's refusal to discuss it makes him a humorous character. And, one would laugh at an individual who follows his culture to unnecessary extremes by effectively taking "public" censorship into his private life. Once again, the interpretation of this scene is up to the individual and the context of the situation. And, to develop an understanding of how a contextual basis may be formed in farce, I will now delve into the farcical framework and establish sub-genres.

It could be argued that, as with genre classifications, any labelling system would limit and contain farce through oversimplification. Perceiving sub-genres as archetypal examples – which remain viscous entities and form parts of Bermel's "continents" – alleviates this problem. Bermel, Baker and Davis offer a breakdown of what they consider to be different "types" of farce. Bermel suggests four forms: realism, fantasy, theatricalism and the well-made-play.⁴³ (I have interpreted the first three as styles within the genre of farce, and the fourth as a "stand-alone" style, which is generally characterised by realism.) These, in turn, are influenced by "symbolism, satire, burlesque, parody, expressionism, surrealism, and other stylistic treatments".⁴⁴ On the other hand, Baker divides all farces into either character controlled/driven, where the characters control the action, or playwright controlled/driven, with the action controlling the characters.⁴⁵ Davis's breakdown is more specific, comprising humiliation, deception, reversal, quarrel and circular farces. The latter exists in two main sub-forms – the talisman farce and snowball farce – and is virtually identical to the well-made-play.⁴⁶ Circular farces are the most complex, and it is common to have the other forms exist within the framework of the play. There is also interconnection between the different forms espoused by the various theorists. Deception, humiliation and revenge farces fall mainly in the character-driven category, circular farces are generally

playwright-driven and quarrel farces tend to be a combination of the two.⁴⁷ First, I will look at Bermel's four forms.

Bermel's "realistic" sub-genre is so called because of its attempt at imitating life.⁴⁸ It is situated in "real life" settings and in an extreme form "would not have a fictitious subject but consist of life unedited".⁴⁹ An example of an attempt at a further advance towards realism is Ray Cooney's personal rule of having no time pass between the end of act one and the beginning of act two.⁵⁰ In his plays, the interval has the practical function of providing the actors and audience with a break in the action.

Alternatively, fantasy farce moves completely away from reality. In Aristophanes' *The Birds*, Pithetaerus and Euelpides convince Epops, the king of the birds, to construct a barrier between heaven and earth in order that the birds receive all the sacrifices intended for the gods and serve "mankind more conscientiously than the delinquent gods had done".⁵¹ A more modern example of fantasy farce would be Noël Coward's *Blithe Spirit* (1941) – described by the author as "An Improbable Farce in Three Acts"⁵² – where, after a séance, Charles Condomine's dead wife returns as a ghost. However, fantasy could be employed in a less fantastic manner. A common element in farce is role reversal. Slaves or servants are able to talk to their masters almost as equals, and extremely intelligent characters low on the social scale – like Pithetaerus and Euelpides – are able to outsmart their "betters". While, to a modern audience role reversal is in no way outrageous or scandalous, to an Ancient Greek – or medieval – audience, this could only occur "on stage".⁵³ For example, in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, the women of Athens and Sparta are empowered by going on a sex strike to stop their men from fighting a war. As Bermel points out, "the prospect of Greek women in the age of Socrates joining forces with the wives of the enemy and putting an

end to warfare seems wishful, if not unbelievable”.⁵⁴ Similarly, a very popular late-medieval farcical scenario, employed by such writers as Hans Sachs – to be discussed later in this chapter – involves a domineering wife coupled with a weak and submissive husband. While this marital situation may well have existed in the private sphere, the expected subservience of women would have made this public scenario complete fantasy.

Bermel’s theatricalism differs from realistic and fantasy farce by constantly reminding the spectator that the play being experienced is a performance.⁵⁵ Theatricalism comes in many forms. For example, an actor speaking directly to an audience eliminates the barrier between spectator and performer. An actor might break out of character to do this or, as in many Feydeau plays, remain in character to communicate with the audience as if it were another character. At the beginning of *Hotel Paradiso* (1894), we have the following scene:

BONIFACE: Oh, Spring, give your fragrance of roses...
(Suddenly sees the audience and says:) Aah!
ANGELIQUE (off-stage): Boniface!
BONIFACE: (looking at audience): Later.⁵⁶

When not speaking directly to the audience, Feydeau’s characters tend to perform realistic farce. A more recent, and quite ingenious, use of theatricalism is found in Christopher Durang’s partly farcical play *The Actor’s Nightmare* (1983). George (the protagonist) arrives on stage and Meg, the stage manager, informs him that the lead actor has been injured, and George, as the understudy, must go on for him. However, George has no knowledge of ever having attended a rehearsal and believes he is an accountant. He is not even sure of his name and is called Stanley at one point. He leaves the stage and is later pushed back on dressed as Hamlet and forced to perform Noël Coward’s *Private Lives*. Then the play becomes *Hamlet*, followed by a combination of Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame* and *Happy Days*, and finally Robert Bolt’s

A Man For All Seasons. Unless George says the wrong line, the other actors seem at ease with the performance, whereas George is completely at a loss. Depending on how it is directed, I would assume George is very much aware of the “audience” in front of him while attempting to make the best of a bad – and terrifying – situation. This does not prevent him from breaking out of whatever character he is attempting to play to ask for guidance or admit to his ignorance of the situation. In his soliloquy, George apologises to the audience for the confusion on stage and starts reminiscing about his “past” life. Being abstract – and at times surreal – in nature, *The Actor’s Nightmare* lends itself well to theatricalism because it need not limit itself to the “logic” of realism. The behaviour of the other characters in the final scene sees the play straying into fantasy as the line dividing the world of the play and the world of the actors becomes blurred. Finally, the play shifts completely out of farce into tragedy with George – as Sir Thomas More – being beheaded.⁵⁷

Similar elements of theatricalism are evident in Stoppard’s *The Real Inspector Hound*. While the play is not, strictly speaking, a farce, it does contain certain farcical elements. The humour created by the character Birdboot is often related to his inability to hide his real, and imaginary, extra-marital affairs. By being a play-within-a-play, *Hound’s* two critics – Moon and Birdboot – are both a part of the audience and the performance. In the first half they are “off stage” amongst the “real” audience, and in the second half on stage with the other characters. As in *The Actor’s Nightmare* there is an abstract element through the blurring of the “real” with the “unreal” as the critics become a part of the stage action. However, this blending is more comprehensive with the play concluding with Major Magnus Muldoon turning out to be three other characters: Inspector Hound and Lady Cynthia’s dead husband Albert (both part of the play world), and the critic Puckeridge (part of Moon and Birdboot’s “real” world). At

this point theatricalism and fantasy mix to create their own reality. Once Moon and Birdboot leave the safety of the “real” world they become a part of the play’s world, making it possible for them to be killed. In a subtler approach, Ray Cooney’s *Run For Your Wife* (1984), is, superficially, a completely realistic farce. However, it does contain one element which shifts it into theatricalism: two apartments – in different parts of London – are superimposed to produce a single set with the characters in the separate rooms often on stage simultaneously. The only important doubling is a telephone on either side of the centre-stage settee, which “exists” in both settings.

Finally, the well-made-play tradition goes back to the Greek New Comedy of Menander, the Roman Comedy of Plautus and Terence and “on down through the plays of Molière, Beaumarchais, Labiche, Pinero, Feydeau to the West End, Parisian, Broadway, Hollywood, and television audience-pleasers of today”.⁵⁸ This farce style is characterised by “*No effect without cause* - otherwise known as *No loose ends*”.⁵⁹ In other words, each event will trigger the next. Most multiple-act farces are of this kind. In addition, Bermel claims that “each farce [is remembered] for its individual turns or shticks, not its continuity”.⁶⁰ And, the lives of the various characters are “a series of surprises and shocks”.⁶¹ Therefore, to make a continuous storyline, it would be logical to have each event activate the next. However, as this very complex theatrical form is virtually identical to the circular farce, it will be analysed after exploring Davis’s other sub-forms.

According to Davis’s breakdown, the simplest farcical sub-genres are the deception, humiliation and reversal farces, which require “little more than a suitable victim, a practical joker and a good idea for a prank”.⁶² These are usually fairly short, with few complications. For example, the sixteenth-century German “skits” of Hans

Sachs, tend to be based on a single trick or deception. In *The Stolen Bacon*, Heinz Knoll and Kunz Droll steal some bacon from the miserly Hermann Doll and with the help of Hans, the village priest, they deceive Hermann into believing that he “stole” his own bacon for his mistress Striegel Christen. They then threaten to tell his wife, and the play ends with Hermann paying off the priest and his accomplices to maintain silence. In a deception farce, the character does not realise that he/she has been outwitted, and is often reconciled with the practical jokers. On the other hand, humiliation farces differ in that they “subject their victims to explicit degradation and celebrate their victories quite openly”.⁶³ Simple farces highlight an important farcical characteristic which is defined by Davis as farce’s often aggressive – and hostile – nature.⁶⁴ Bermel depicts the genre as being “cruel, often brutal, even murderous [and] flouts the bounds of reason, good taste, fairness, and what we commonly think of as sanity”.⁶⁵ Only through comprehending the workings of the farcical character’s mind, will an understanding of these characteristics be generated. To this end, I will follow Alan Knight’s lead and compare French medieval morality plays with farce.⁶⁶

For example, to transform a deception farce into a revenge farce, a trick need only be followed by a counter-trick, with the conflict being “momentarily neutralised” to end the play.⁶⁷ In contrast, at the conclusion of a morality play, one lacks the sense that by adding another action the story would continue. One reason is that the ultimate goal of the morality play’s protagonist is “conversion and salvation (or damnation)”.⁶⁸ Farcical characters have no ultimate moralistic aim. Through trickery, a farcical character seeks to acquire such things as “status, power, goods, money, or sex”.⁶⁹ The reason for achieving these goals is a selfish one and, as in *The Stolen Bacon*, at the expense of another character. A further difference between a farce and a morality play is that the latter is peopled with characters bound by a set of moral values imposed by a

higher or supernatural being (God). Their choice is to follow these moral standards – and attain the ultimate goal of heavenly salvation – or reject them and be eternally damned. Farcical characters have no moral code, and their actions have no “ultimate” consequences. As suggested by Knight, whereas “morality characters are either moral or immoral; farcical characters are amoral”. And, while the former have “only to yield to temptation”, the latter deceive to achieve the goal.⁷⁰ Deception, humiliation and reversal farces with simple plot lines and two-dimensional characters are concerned with the survival of the fittest: the ignorant preyed upon by the amoral shrewd. However, as Davis points out, in deception and humiliation farce the victims often bring about their own punishment, inviting little sympathetic reaction from an audience expecting to be entertained.⁷¹ For instance, in *The Stolen Bacon* Hermann Doll is punished for his avariciousness, and the ease of deception could imply that such a nasty simpleton deserves to be duped. Amorality and dishonesty are not limited to the simple farces but, as will be demonstrated, also exist in more complex farcical forms. However, additional background knowledge of the other forms must first be explored, to fully integrate the use of amorality into the thesis.

The quarrel farce – consisting of an ever-escalating argument – is more complex than deception, humiliation and reversal farces. A useful example is Anton Chekhov’s one-act play *The Bear* (1888), which commences with the widow Popova mourning the death of her husband Nikolai while resolving to permanently shun society. Smirnov, a bullying landowner, arrives and Popova refuses to discuss the money owed to him by the deceased Nikolai. Their argument gradually grows in volume and culminates in them choosing to fight a duel. When Smirnov and Popova realise they have fallen in love, she says, “Get away from me! Take your hands off me! I hate you! I demand satisfaction!” This is followed by “A *prolonged kiss*”.⁷² The play concludes with

Popova telling her servant Luka to disregard the order she gave at the start of the play, and to “tell them in the stables – no oats for Toby [her deceased husband’s horse] at all today”.⁷³ Popova’s “rejection” of Toby symbolises her rejection of her mourning for Nikolai who has now been replaced by Smirnov.⁷⁴ This “comedy-joke”⁷⁵ – as Vera Gottlieb describes it – is an exemplary example of quarrel farce because of the lengths to which the quarrel is taken.⁷⁶ Unlike Sachs’ plays, there is much more complex character development. And, as stated by Davis, a complex quarrel farce “choreographs the progress of multiple exchanges between the quarrelling partners”.⁷⁷ Chekhov alters the more “traditional” quarrel farce mode by having a number of extended interruptions in the argument – for instance Smirnov’s monologue – which serve to deepen the characters’ personalities, making them more three-dimensional. This also prevents the argument from becoming too drawn out, repetitive and dull.⁷⁸ Furthermore, there is the bizarre love-triangle between Popova, Smirnov and Nikolai’s memory, which, as pointed out by Gottlieb, sets up a stock situation for a pistol duel.⁷⁹ This becomes a parody for two reasons: first the conventional climactic melodramatic duel of “rival lovers fighting over [the] passive [female] figure in the background of the action” is replaced by Popova taking the quarrel to the ultimate conclusion and becoming “an active participant in the action”.⁸⁰ Secondly, Popova proves ignorant of what constitutes fighting a duel, and Smirnov finds himself providing her with the relevant information. This makes them humorous characters because an audience would laugh at both their inability to fight the duel properly, and the absurdity of one’s opponent providing the necessary instructions.

Thus far, deception, humiliation and reversal farces have hinted at the aggressiveness of farce. Quarrel farce highlights another vital aspect: unreality.⁸¹ Bermel goes further and describes farce as containing not only unreality but also

brutality and objectivity, which, in turn, “modify one another. The unreality is objective. And ... the brutality is unreal”.⁸² These work together, as pointed out by Davis, to balance out the hostility with joking and “joyous festivity”.⁸³ This can be demonstrated using a scene from Molière’s play *Les Fourberies de Scapin* – *Scapin’s Trickeries* – (1671). Here Scapin tricks his master Gèronte into believing that he (Gèronte) is being pursued by brigands, and hides Gèronte in a sack. Then Scapin repeatedly beats the sack with a stick while acting as if he is being by the “brigands”. This is performed three times, but on the third attempt, Scapin becomes too enthusiastic, pretending six men have come looking for his master. Having had enough, Gèronte comes out of the sack and discovers the deception. He becomes angry and chases Scapin off stage. As pointed out by Bermel, the slapstick was originally a “blunt wooden instrument carried by certain members of the *Commedia dell’Arte*, [which] looked like a cudgel but was flexible”. When used it would produce a “sharp cracking noise. This was not a natural sound but a sound effect. It was artificial”.⁸⁴ Just as the slapstick’s sound was artificial, so are Gèronte’s wounds. As Bermel argues:

In farce, characters seldom get badly injured, almost never die. Although a character doesn’t merely clash with other characters but also collides with the scenery and props, he stays more or less intact. Blood flows like wine in a heavy drama or melodrama. In farce the victim, who is apparently bloodless, looks dazed after the collision, then shakes his head, picks himself up, and goes off to meet the next collision. Farce shows us human bodies that are indestructible, sponges for punishment.⁸⁵

At the end of a tragedy, the “dead” will get up and take a bow, but in farce, the artificiality is both within and without the performance. Bentley suggests that the violence in farce acts as a harmless expression for aggressive, anti-social feelings.⁸⁶ Violence in farce must be considered unreal, with Bermel providing the best description of knockabout humour, where the kick-in-the-pants can be seen as choreography rather than street fighting.⁸⁷ Bermel asks why an audience should both accept and laugh at “the sight of characters who stumble into one physical indignity after another”, and

concludes that these characters are indestructible and become more – and less – than mortal.⁸⁸

The slapstick in silent black-and-white movies demonstrates the extent to which farce can go in its “quest” for unreality. For instance, as well as emerging virtually unscathed from life-threatening incidents, the actors might perform enormous overstated pratfalls or execute huge reactions to being poked in the backside. However, slapstick did not end with the introduction of sound. Some of the best farceurs to emerge on screen are cartoon characters, particularly those of the Warner Brothers’ *Loony Tunes* series. In his never-ending chase for the Road Runner, Wile E. Coyote has been shot at, fallen from cliffs and mountain tops, been run over by trucks and trains, had ludicrously heavy objects dropped on him and had dynamite explode in his vicinity. Although he does not come out unscathed – his fur may be singed after an explosion or his body literally squashed flat by a large rock – there is no blood and no death. In the next scene he has returned to normal, his body is intact and he continues his relentless race to catch his prey. Farcical characters are best described as cartoon-like, ready to bounce back whatever may befall them.

There are exceptions, and death – says Bermel – can also be farcical.⁸⁹ In Joe Orton’s play *Loot* (1968), the body of Hal’s mother is wrapped in a shroud and continually moved to different areas of the stage. The humour stems from her being immobile and having her features completely covered. She is, in effect, dehumanised and made unreal, and as the audience is not introduced to Hal’s living mother, no sympathetic bond is formed. Bermel states that film has greatly increased the ability to use death farcically, such as having “characters who die and spring back to life”.⁹⁰ At the conclusion of the third series of *Blackadder*, the title character is hit by a cannon

ball and seemingly dies. A moment later Blackadder wakes up and states, “Actually, I’m not sure I am [dead] ... *Miracle upon miracle, he springs to life*. Fortunately that cigarillo box you gave me was placed exactly at the point the cannon ball struck. I’ve always said smoking was good for you”.⁹¹ Death can be made surreal. In *A Fish Called Wanda*, Michael Palin’s character – an animal lover – attempts to murder an elderly woman. At one point he tries to drive a small van over her, but only succeeds in crushing one of her dogs. The scene is farcical because when the camera does a close-up on the dog’s corpse, there is no blood or exposed viscera. The dog is displayed almost as a cartoon character would be: squashed flat but still recognisable, as if it were about to “pop back to life” in the next scene. Later, the humour is compounded as the dog is anthropomorphised by being given a “human” funeral at a cemetery. Although he has no qualms about killing a human, Palin’s character is distraught over his accidental murder of a dog. This shifts the focus away from death to Palin’s inverted moral values which place the life of a dog over that of a human.

Nevertheless, although unreality permeates *A Fish Called Wanda*, *Loot* and other farces, these do not become unbelievable. In his discussion on twentieth-century farce Michael Pertwee sums up the workings of farce by saying that the genre must “combine the incredible with being credible ... [as] laughter dies the moment audiences cease to believe what they are seeing”.⁹² To understand this statement, and to demonstrate how the unreal can be made believable, I will now turn to the more complex circular farce.⁹³ Pertwee’s quote implies the importance of the physical or visual element in farce performance. (Particularly in relation to circular farce in an effort to determine believability.) However, before exploring this theme directly, to be able to fully comprehend how circular farces work, it is important to consider how secondary circular farce characteristics make the unreal believable. These include fate

and coincidences, character amorality (as outlined earlier), misunderstandings, lies, the use of objects, character stubbornness, shaky logic and character obsession.

According to Bermel, while a tragic figure could be seen as having a theoretical internal “tragic flaw”, the farceur’s “flaw” is often external.⁹⁴ In other words, fate will influence – or control – a character’s behaviour and the events in his/her life. Baker interprets this as playwright-driven farce where the external author has absolute power over each individual and consciously moulds the events of the play into the farce form.⁹⁵ For example, a playwright can place a “spell” on the characters – argues Bermel – by causing them to be drugged, drunk, bound, blindfolded, ear-plugged, ill or missing an important piece of clothing.⁹⁶ This will “rob them of some of their senses or faculties, and make them behave like zombies who walk into trouble with their eyes wide open in a glassy stare”.⁹⁷ In other words, the playwright’s “spell” has given the characters “permission” to have an unbalanced life and be susceptible to peril. Bermel further points out that in this situation a character is placed upon,

unfamiliar terrain where he appears odd or outnumbered, and where he feels fearful. He is [seen as] different from everyone else. His clothes, or lack of clothes, his accent, his manners can make him look like an intruder or snooper or source of infection.⁹⁸

However, for the “spell” to be believable, one must be aware of both the context of the situation and the reason why the “spell” would be dangerous to a specific character. For instance, it could be argued that there is nothing inherently humorous about an intoxicated or trouser less individual if there is no reason for him/her to be humorous. A process of contextual preparation is required to make a scene believable.

As Smith suggests, “farces begin in normality, but this is pushed farther and farther into absurdity, anarchy, even nightmare”.⁹⁹ Gottlieb’s description of Ionesco’s absurdist plays provides a fitting portrayal of circular farce in general: farce is a “world

in which automated characters demonstrate both impotence and futility in the face of ludicrous odds which have been deliberately stacked up against them by the playwright”.¹⁰⁰ For example, snowball farce does not start in a dangerous situation, but, as stated by Davis, goes “from small beginnings, [and] grows in size and speed to envelop every bystander in its final explosion and disintegration”.¹⁰¹ In other words, a snowball effect takes place. Pertwee’s *She’s Done it Again* (1970), begins in “normality” – barring the thunder and lightning – in a hotel lobby. However, after a series of mishaps too numerous to list, all the characters’ lives become progressively unsteady. To take one example from act two, the Rector Hubert Porter has his trousers taken away from him by Rodney Percival to stop Porter – whom he mistakenly believes to be attacking women – escaping from the hotel. Pop enters carrying Sylvia’s dress and seeing Hubert being threatened by Rodney knocks him (Rodney) unconscious with a silver platter. Pop exits and Sylvia enters in a state of undress and asks Hubert for advice on what to do about her affair with a married man:

HUBERT: (he comes to her below R. of couch) Oh, please! I can’t discuss these delicate matters without my trousers.
 (SYLVIA bursts into tears and flings her arms around his neck.
 At that precise moment THE BISHOP OF UPTON enters R. unseen.
 He stops, appalled, at the sight of HUBERT, without trousers, apparently embracing a near-naked girl.
 He is a grim, pompous man – and hates HUBERT anyway. He carries HUBERT’s briefcase, which is similar to his own)

SYLVIA: (loudly) I’m going to have a baby!

BISHOP: (appalled) Porter!!
 (The shock of the BISHOP’s appearance is such that HUBERT falls right forward on top of SYLVIA onto the couch)

BISHOP: Porter!
 (HUBERT rolls off SYLVIA, falls to the floor, scrambles up)

HUBERT: Oh, Lord! My Lord! Good Lord! Good evening!
 (he grabs a cushion and holds it in front of his crutch)¹⁰²

Here one returns to fate and farcical brutality. The playwright asks two questions. One: what would constitute Hubert’s worst case scenario? And, two: if a person were to observe Hubert in that situation, which particular person would cause Hubert the greatest embarrassment? Thus, the untimely arrival of the Bishop – at the moment Hubert is at his most vulnerable – sets off an ensuing chain of catastrophic events.

Feydeau's *Le Mariage de Barillon – Barillon's Wedding* – (1890) has a slightly different situation. Unlike *She's Done it Again*, there is no misinterpreted embarrassing situation, but the stage is still set for the inopportune arrival of the “outsider”. Barillon is engaged to the eighteen-year-old Virgine, but finds himself accidentally married to her widowed mother, Madame Jambart. Later in the play, Madame Jambart receives a telegram from her supposedly dead husband, but, as it is the first of April the characters conclude that it is an April Fool's Day joke. (Jambart disappeared at sea two years previously, and he must be dead; eaten alive by fish.) In almost amoral inevitability, the characters become extremely happy on learning that the letter is an “obvious” hoax, and the stage directions read: “Everyone, in almost a frenzy of joy, dances around chanting: ‘He was eaten alive! He was eaten alive!’”¹⁰³ The characters are not evil, but express the relief of being free from one more problem. However, as Baker states, “there is nothing more certain in Feydeau's world than the imminent arrival of anyone whose presence is declared unlikely, especially if that person's entrance will destroy an alibi”.¹⁰⁴ Predictably, a few lines down, the stage directions read, “JAMBART appears, up centre. He is a large, hearty-looking seaman”.¹⁰⁵ Ironically, Jambart is not only still alive but apparently in good health. In other words, when something goes wrong for a farcical character, it goes disastrously wrong, and, as in *She's Done it Again*, Jambart's arrival instigates further complications for the other characters.¹⁰⁶

A snowball farce ensures a character finds him/herself in what might appear to be the worst situation imaginable, and then outdoes it even further. While this is problematic in that a snowball farce may rapidly become ridiculous as disastrous events become catastrophic ones, as stated earlier, a starting point of relative calm can create a believable contextual background. Furthermore, Smith argues that all “madness” is made rational by having each event trigger the next, while remaining logical within the

context of the performance. In being privy to each event, an audience would understand both how and why a particular catastrophe has occurred.¹⁰⁷ The situations become increasingly involved and the characters lose all sense of control, become desperate and behave in an irrational manner. Nonetheless, as the terrible developments in the story would be “real” within the context of the farce, their panic and overreaction would also be “real”. When characters are backed into a corner, desperation and panic increase, and actions which under “normal” situations would seem illogical now – within the context of that particular instance – become rational. Consequently, if an action can be represented on stage, it must (theoretically) be believable to an audience, and when something makes sense to the characters, it would then make sense to an audience. In order to understand why this is so, I must now return to those secondary characteristics outlined earlier – fate and coincidences, character amorality, misunderstandings, lies, the use of objects, character stubbornness, shaky logic and character obsession – which assist in establishing believability.

In complex farces – where the characters are more three-dimensional – fear often drives the action. Consequently this often leads to amorality. For example, when finding themselves in trouble, the desperation of the farcical characters will impel them to do anything – and use anyone – to escape from a potentially damaging situation. Throughout Feydeau’s *Un Fil à la patte* (1894), Bouzin is both a scapegoat and a victim. At the end of the play he is arrested after Bois-d’Enghien steals his clothes:

THE POLICEMAN. Come on you, let’s go!

BOUZIN, *dragging his feet*. No, no! It’s all a mistake! (*As he passes BOIS-D’ENGHIEN, at the door.*) Monsieur, for heaven’s sake, tell them!

BOIS-D’ENGHIEN, *hypocritically*. For shame, Bouzin! At your age! (*He enters the dressing room and closes the door in BOUZIN’s face.*)¹⁰⁸

Bois-d’Enghien resorts to deceit in order to prevent his arrest and farce’s unreality allows him to get away with such outrageous behaviour because of the lack of ultimate

consequences. As characters are backed into a corner they become obsessive, and even mild-mannered people suddenly find themselves lying in an attempt to exculpate themselves from any threatening situation. Often the lies become very elaborate as the character fabricates more and more outrageous falsehoods in order to explain a potentially damaging predicament and/or attempt to corroborate the previous lie. This is particularly noticeable in many Ray Cooney farces where circumstances force a character to lie. Finally, the lies become so outrageous that it is impossible to return to the truth.

Lies are ideal farcical tools because, like circular farce, they are completely, or partially, unreal while being passed off as believable. Therefore, within the context of a snowball farce, the lies merge well with fate, the two often fuelling each other, making farcical situations very complicated and highly detailed. For example, in Cooney's *Two Into One* (1985) George Pigden, a Personal Secretary, attempts to organise a romantic assignation for his boss Richard Wiley, a Government Minister, at a hotel where the Minister is staying with his wife Pamela. After having left to go to the theatre, Pamela returns unexpectedly – she forgets her ticket in her room – while George is standing at the hotel reception desk about to register under the false name of Charles Easter.¹⁰⁹ In his panic he utters “Christmas” and the hotel manager writes this down believing it to be his name. After this one mistake George cannot go back to the truth and his lies become more outrageous as he attempts to cover his tracks. Pamela teases him, thinking that he is using a false name in order to have a romantic afternoon with one of his secretaries. While she asks him with whom he is involved Richard re-enters the reception, and in desperation George attempts to hide Pamela from Richard by informing her that she is the object of his affection, and then pushing her into the elevator. The previous – fairly lengthy – account would only take about a minute on stage and initiate the convoluted

situations of later scenes. An adequate description of the plot would take pages because the complexity of the complications which arise. However, the above synopsis of a small section of scene one demonstrates how quickly lies and fate work together to set the groundwork for later chaos. There are many complications and two-thirds of the way through act one Pamela convinces George – who had been trying to escape from her – to carry out his “promise” of having an affair with her. At this point Richard enters and George – in order to allay any suspicions Richard may have – convinces him that he (George) is romantically involved with a man named Ted. Although this further complicates George’s life, Richard believes the lie and there is no turning back.

The next secondary characteristic designed to create difficulties in a character’s life is the use of objects. For instance, in act one of Feydeau’s *Un Fil à la patte*, Bois-d’Enghien repeatedly attempts to hide a newspaper -- announcing his pending marriage to another woman -- from his lover, Lucette. The more he tries to conceal it, the more the newspaper keeps re-appearing. In this snowball farce, an object plays a minor role, with all the complications being initiated by Bois-D’Enghien’s “minor” indiscretion of having one last night with his mistress rather than tell her he must leave her to marry. On the other hand, an object can go much further and become the protagonist – or, as Bermel labels it, the antagonist.¹¹⁰ Described as a talisman farce by Davis, this play is one in which the unreality is bound to reality through the object, or talisman, and all events stem from the characters’ attempts to obtain or eliminate the offending item. As suggested by Davis, a talisman-farce’s “mathematical permutations and combinations are anchored in reality by a physical object ... from which all confusions flow”.¹¹¹ Hence, an object can lead to the next farcical characteristic already mentioned in the example taken from *She’s Done it Again*: misunderstandings.

In Carlo Goldoni's *Il Ventaglio – The Fan* – (1763) Candida and Evaristo are in love. However, they wish to keep it a secret from Candida's aunt, Geltrude. (Ironically, Geltrude already knows how they feel about each other.) Thus, when Candida accidentally breaks her fan, Evaristo buys another from the shopkeeper Susanna and gives it to the village girl Giannina, asking her to convey it secretly to Candida. Susanna, Candida and the two men in love with Giannina – Coronato and Crespino – witness this exchange, and all now assume that Evaristo is in love with Giannina. Out of spite, Candida agrees to marry a Baron. The fan changes hands on numerous occasions and when lost, causes heartache to Evaristo who can only prove his innocence through its recovery. Misunderstandings are ideal farcical foils, as they produce conflict situations which can result in more misunderstandings and hence extend the storyline. These become more precarious as more confusion arises.¹¹² As stated by Davis, “talisman-farces draw their comic force chiefly from the practical jokes played by misleading appearances upon the mind in its struggle to perceive reality correctly”.¹¹³ The outcome is what I describe as “shaky logic”, brought on through character stubbornness.

As with the example from *She's Done it Again*, there is a completely logical – and, in this case, totally innocent – explanation for what has occurred, but the visual evidence against this is so overwhelming that the other characters will automatically reach the wrong conclusions. On the other hand, a character may not be given the time to think things through properly, and their “shaky logic” is based on their emotions. Characters stubbornly refuse to listen to reason, while at other times the “evidence” for their “case” is too convincing. This can lead to an argument – an incursion into quarrel farce – and Davis stresses how in a confrontation, the talisman can induce characters to be “so blinded by their anger and indignation [or some other emotion] that the flow of

mutual accusations continues unhindered by illogicalities which are, of course, obvious to the audience”.¹¹⁴ For example, in act three, scene two, of *Il Ventaglio*, Giannina and Susanna argue over the situation concerning the fan – Crespino comments occasionally – with neither able to give a straight answer which would resolve the conflict. Therefore, their argument is “an essentially illusory dispute based on mistaken apprehensions”.¹¹⁵ In many cases, if there were no misunderstanding there would be no farce:

SUSANNA. Poor Signora Candida!
 CRESPINO. What’s the matter with her?
 GIANNINA. How should I know what’s the matter with her, you fool?
 SUSANNA. Ah, *I* know what’s the matter with Signora Candida.
 CRESPINO [*to SUSANNA*]. What?
 SUSANNA [*pointedly*]. And Giannina ought to know as well as I.
 GIANNINA. I? What’s it got to do with me?
 SUSANNA. A good deal, seeing that you’re the cause of her illness.
 GIANNINA [*jumping up*]. Me?
 SUSANNA. There you go! There’s no talking to you.
 CRESPINO [*getting up*]. I should very much like to know what all this trouble’s about.
 GIANNINA [*to SUSANNA*]. You can’t talk anything but dirt.
 SUSANNA. Now, now, don’t get excited.
 CRESPINO [*to SUSANNA*]. Let her speak.
 GIANNINA [*to SUSANNA*]. What grounds have you for saying that?
 SUSANNA. I shan’t say another word.
 GIANNINA. No, no, speak out!
 SUSANNA. Now, Giannina, don’t force me to speak.
 GIANNINA. If you are an honest woman, speak!
 SUSANNA. All right then I will!¹¹⁶

Coincidentally, Geltrude arrives and prevents the misunderstanding from being resolved. Fate has once again had power over the situation. Davis quotes Walter Kerr who states that “matter [in this case, the fan] is undeniably master, as it is when man [*sic*] is the temporary captive of hiccups”.¹¹⁷ In other words, just as a person cannot deliberately stop hiccupping, there is nothing a character can do to prevent the obstructions caused by fate: Evaristo wants to marry Candida, but the complications created by the presence, and the importance, of the fan hinder his plans. The fan is “out to get” everyone, spreading its malevolence slowly and subtly as each character comes under its influence.

To fully understand the power of the object in farce, it is worthwhile to compare how objects are used in other theatrical forms. For Bermel, “the difference between a gun in melodrama and in farce is that while in melodrama the characters must beware of what it is, in farce they have to beware of what it may become”.¹¹⁸ In other words, objects are more versatile and influential in farce. For example, because of their sharp, dangerous shape, a pair of scissors could be construed as being a weapon, whereas a fan is apparently harmless, with no violent properties. However, farce can bestow more power on a fan than a pair of scissors, which, if used as a murder weapon, usually only directly affect a small number of characters. As suggested by Bermel, harmless objects can play a role in a tragedy, but only a limited one.¹¹⁹ The handkerchief in *Othello* represents the protagonist’s love for his wife and her apparent betrayal of that love. Iago turns it into a catalyst which feeds Othello’s jealousy and provokes him to murder Desdemona. Elsewhere in the drama, the handkerchief has no meaning. In a farce “objects act more blatantly, more industriously, to earn their place in the script”.¹²⁰ In Goldoni’s play, the fan gains enough importance to become the protagonist, even giving the play its title and being used in ways it “never seemed intended for”.¹²¹ As pointed out by Bermel, it must be noted that only context gives objects power. In farce, a fan has control over the other characters because of the significance with which it has been bestowed.¹²² This is the final ingredient found within the farcical text which assists believability: character obsession.

Although their obsession is seen most clearly in the importance characters place on objects, it exists in all farcical forms, especially in the circular farces. Farcical characters approach the world with a great deal of seriousness. As pointed out by Smith: “Nothing kills farce more surely than any kind of rib-nudging determination to be funny on the part of the actor. A straight face and the utmost seriousness is

essential”.¹²³ Brian Rix quotes Ben Travers in *Life in the Farce Lane* as saying that Ralph Lynn (a farceur from the early twentieth century) “believed that the character he was playing at the time shouldn’t try to be funny, but must be motivated by an honest and serious conviction”.¹²⁴ This is important for two reasons outlined earlier. Firstly, when something goes wrong, it invariably goes dreadfully wrong. Thus, the characters have grounds for overreaction, and the actors for what may be considered elsewhere “over the top” acting. Secondly, no matter how chaotic a situation may become, an audience will only believe in the situation if the actor does likewise. For instance, if the characters are reacting fearfully, their fear is real within the context of that specific situation. This panic might then induce amoral behaviour and/or prevent the characters from thinking through a situation logically, resulting in them dealing with it in a convoluted manner as George Pigden does in *Two Into One*.¹²⁵ However, the one aspect which is particularly germane in making this overreaction – and all other farcical characteristics – believable, is the physical. (By this I mean both the performance as a whole, and the use of the body in performance.) Before moving onto chapter two, I will introduce the extent to which the physical influences the farcical form.

The importance of performance is stressed in editions of plays by such modern playwrights as Cooney and Pertwee which contain all, or most, of the following: detailed descriptions of each character; a meticulous outline of the set together with a map; a photograph of the set used at the first performance; and exhaustive lighting, sound and property plots. Furthermore, throughout the play there are copious stage directions, echoing Feydeau’s plays – written at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century – which are strewn with stage directions. Michael Frayn takes stage direction to the ultimate limit in act two of *Noises Off* (1985) when the fictional play *Nothing On* is heard “performed” to an imaginary audience, while the “back stage”

action is chiefly mimed. While one could argue that excessive stage directions limit how one may perform a play, a director who ignores them would be doing so at his/her own risk because – as with the dialogue – they are an integral part of the play and were written for a purpose. As has already been stated, farces invariably have extremely involved storylines and complex action sequences. Thus, timing must be impeccable, and, if an actor fractionally misses a cue, continuity could be destroyed completely. (As Katherine Worth states, “farce requires the strictest discipline of all”¹²⁶ while permitting “disorder ... a seemingly free run while maintaining unshakeable order”.¹²⁷ Gottlieb even stresses, “the fragility of farce requires such a degree of technical perfection, of particular performance skills, that many farces have been written for specific actors”.¹²⁸) Split-second timing suggests that everything must be done quickly and a farce can be equated to an exceptionally complex mathematical formula which must be worked out accurately to obtain the correct answer.¹²⁹ Innumerable entrances and exits are very popular in farce. For example, Cooney’s *Two Into One* contains numerous scenes where two characters who must never meet enter and exit a room – from different doors – in quick succession without seeing each other. Should a character enter at the wrong time or through the incorrect door, the performance would become unbelievable. In Cooney’s *One for the Pot* (1963), the lead actor plays four separate characters who, at times, are simultaneously on stage. This is accomplished by doubles entering with their backs to the audience and having secret exits behind the furniture. When hiding in a drinks cabinet, the lead actor can exit through the false back, be replaced by his upstage-facing double, and then enter as “another” character through the door.

Multiple exits are also useful when a character is being chased. The chase is a very popular – and very old – farcical practice even used by Aristophanes in *The Wasps* where, in desperation, Procleon finds more and more ingenious ways to escape his son

and servants. He finally slides down the roof in order not to be seen. The chase is also useful in speeding up a performance: there is a race against time as a character desperately attempts to prevent other characters from meeting (George Pigden in *Two Into One*), or endeavours to accomplish an action before another character's return (Bois-d'Enghien in *Un Fil à la patte*). Such a focus on the physical indicates that farceurs must work with their whole body, manipulating them throughout the performance space while interacting with the people and objects around them. Then, like a never-ending cycle, the characters become desperate, the action is speeded up, the characters' world is made unsteady, and the potential for making mistakes arises. This ensues in more chaos and the characters become increasingly more desperate. Finally, performance speed does have an effect on believability. Just as the characters are prevented from thinking rationally, the audience is also given little time to reflect upon a scene logically, further compelling them to accept all of the characters' actions.

However, it is not only the situation which speeds up performance. Dialogue is equally important. Smith states that "there is often a verbal agility in the dialogue and repartee of a good farce that corresponds to the physical agility sometimes required by the actors".¹³⁰ While plays by Cooney and Pertwee may contain copious stage directions, lines are relatively short – with no monologues unless required for some humorous effect – and they occur in quick succession creating an effect akin to a game of table tennis. The lines "bounce" between the performers like an imaginary ball of energy which must never "fall", or there is the risk of losing the play's impetus. Omitting a verbal cue is just as damaging as missing a visual one. Furthermore, unless required for a double-take or some form of physical stage business, pauses have no place in farce because they slow down a production by delaying reactions.

To a great degree, it is the powerful identification with the supposed simplistic physical aspect of the genre, rather than the verbal, which has condemned farce to remain low down in the theatrical hierarchy. This “line of attack” is chosen, possibly because – from a structural point of view – farce cannot be criticised as being unambiguous and straightforward. As attested by T. G. A. Nelson’s, albeit simplistic, encapsulation of the simple and complex farces,

Farce has two faces, one harsh and one bland. The extreme of blandness is reached in Brandon Thomas’s *Charley’s Aunt*, with its harmless transvestism, ludicrous catch-phrases, and implausibly mistaken identities; the extreme of harshness is represented by Joe Orton’s *Loot*, with its body-snatchings, bribery, and betrayals. These different types of farce are linked, however, by more than the use of a few shared devices such as slapstick, identity-confusion, and enjoyable probabilities of plot. Often we can discern the skeleton of harsh farce beneath the plump figure of bland farce.¹³¹

Therefore, chapter two will expand on points raised in chapter one concerning the nature of farce while exploring the physical elements of the genre, leading to a focus on the body and the grotesque in medieval carnival and its relationship to farce. But firstly, farce will be compared to other theatrical forms to analyse its influence on drama while exploring its positioning in the generic hierarchy.

Chapter 2

The Western theatrical hierarchy stands firm with two figures at its apex: William Shakespeare and Tragedy. As Russ McDonald suggests, from the lofty heights of “high culture”, these figures look down upon all others with a notable degree of “genre snobbery”.¹ Bermel concludes that “according to most critical writings”, tragedy has gone from being a theatrical form like any other, to the ideal,² while farce, as stated by John Dennis Hurrell, has “been relegated to the lowest level of the series”.³ This chapter will further the argument that farce is both a rich, complex genre, and a vital part of the theatrical “world”. The hierarchy will be initially destabilised by exploring the manifestation of farce’s physical aspects in the plays of William Shakespeare. Farce will then be approached in an oblique manner through a study of *Commedia dell’Arte* and Medieval Carnival, to demonstrate the intricacies the genre can achieve.⁴ Furthermore, a detailed study of these “pre-literary” forms – the former created in a theatrical frame and the latter, I will argue, outside a matrixed theatre space – will permit me to disassociate farce from the written or “literary” text. This is important because, as suggested by Baker, farce is “less susceptible to the tools of literary criticism than is the more respected genre of comedy”.⁵ Farce’s focus on the theatrical automatically places it at a disadvantage if the form is approached principally from a literary point of view. This will be expanded upon later, after exploring the many other reasons why farce is seen in a negative light.

The Theatrical Hierarchy

One theory which places farce at the bottom of the theatrical hierarchy is that, as pointed out by Smith, the word “farce” is relatively new.⁶ Both he and Davis state that

farce emerged as a distinct genre in France in the late Middle Ages.⁷ Nevertheless, as attested to by examples from plays by Aristophanes in the previous chapter, the longevity of farcical techniques is evident. To once again quote Davis: “the simplest kind of farce requires little more than a suitable victim, a practical joker and a good idea for a prank”,⁸ and deception, humiliation and revenge farces did not cease to exist in a particular historical period. Similarly, the “advanced” techniques of the more complex farcical styles – such as multiple exits, chase scenes and mistaken identities – are not limited to a single era. While tragic events are a part of history, practical jokes, humour and laughter, have always existed alongside them. The argument that farce is inferior to other theatrical forms because of its late arrival to the list of dramatic terms is invalid. The word “farce” may be “young” but its techniques are not.

According to Davis, the word “farce” derives from the Latin word *farcire*, which means “to stuff”.⁹ And, as farce can be “short and often episodic in structure”, it can be easily inserted into plays of other genres.¹⁰ As pointed out by Smith, farce could thus become a foil to a serious theme in a tragedy, or a humorous alternative to the wit of comedy.¹¹ However, as “it is the nature of foils to be seen as subservient”¹² its characteristics are deemed less important than the genre in which it is located. Nicholas Brooke points out that with the development of seventeenth-century French classicism, comedy – and therefore farce – was expected to remain entirely separate from tragedy.¹³ This endorses *The New Oxford Dictionary*, which defines a tragedy as “a play dealing with tragic events and having an unhappy ending, especially concerning the downfall of the main character”.¹⁴ It makes no mention of humour, which implies that laughter is an alien response in the tragic context. A spectator is expected, and encouraged, to partake in the characters’ suffering, empathise with their grief and understand their pain.¹⁵ Such a reductive definition assumes that all tragedies are identical, and must be tragic from

beginning to end. Laughter during performance could suggest the tragedy is of an inferior quality because of its humorous elements. Or, it could be judged a failure because a group of incompetent actors were incapable of performing it “correctly”. Nonetheless, *Hamlet*, possibly the most famous Western play ever written, does incorporate farce in many of its scenes and – according to French classicism – *Hamlet* would thus be a mediocre work. However, echoing Smith’s comment on farce as a “foil” or humorous alternative, I would argue that farce could improve a tragedy – or melodrama, or comedy – by adding a counterbalance to its tragic/melodramatic/comic events.

For example, two of *Hamlet*’s farceurs (or “foils”) are Polonius and Osrick. Polonius claims that “brevity is the soul of wit, / And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes” (2.2.90-91), and that he “will be brief” (2.2.92). Nonetheless, Queen Gertrude then informs him that his words need “More matter, with less art” (2.2.95). Laughter is directed at Polonius the farceur because of his hypocrisy. Then, towards the end of the play Osrick invites Hamlet to fight a “friendly” duel with Laertes, and Hamlet sets Osrick up as a humorous character, by mocking him. (Osrick is described as a “waterfly” [5.2.83] by Hamlet.) A farcical paradigm is created: Hamlet, the comedian, uses wit to baffle Osrick who, through his inability to counterattack, becomes the farcical victim. Hamlet’s ridicule becomes the audience’s ridicule, and they laugh with Hamlet at Osrick. In the following passage, Osrick agrees with everything Hamlet says, even when Hamlet deliberately contradicts himself:

OSRICK: Sweet lord, if your lordship were at leisure, I should impart a thing to you from his majesty.

HAMLET: I will receive it, sir, with all diligence of spirit. Put your bonnet to its right use. ’Tis for the head.

OSRICK: I thank your lordship, it is very hot.

HAMLET: No, believe me, ’tis very cold. The wind is northerly.

OSRICK: It is indifferent cold, my lord, indeed.

HAMLET: But yet methinks it is very sultry and hot for my complexion.

OSRICK: Exceedingly, my lord. It is very sultry, as ’twere – I cannot tell how. (5.2.90-101)¹⁶

However, to fully comprehend the influence of farce on tragedy, I will quote Nelson's analysis of *Othello* in full to demonstrate how farcical devices have been used in a tragedy. It must be noted that Nelson uses the words "comic" and "comedy" where I would use "farcical and "farce":

The tragedy of *Othello* is full of comic devices such as overheard (and misunderstood) conversations and a lost handkerchief. Brabantio and Othello behave, at times, like the deceived father and cuckolded husband so often encountered in comedy; Othello's greatest fear often seems to be that he will lose his status of heroic leader and be reduced to a comic butt. Iago, a villain, weirdly resembles the comic trickster and go-between, embezzling money and presents sent by the foolish lover Roderigo to the unapproachable Desdemona.¹⁷

As pointed out by Brooke, unlike French Classicism, Elizabethan and Jacobean traditions "always resisted [the] separation" between tragedy and comedy (or farce).¹⁸ Rather than diminishing a play, such an addition can create a richer and more varied text with much greater performance range. For example, if the aim of a production is to prospectively move an audience emotionally, farce will increase this potential. According to Nelson, the humorous elements in *Othello* "succeed in making the tragedy more painful: [as] its dignity and splendour are threatened by the intrusion of the sordid and the every day".¹⁹ Similarly, a humorous scene placed after a particularly dramatic moment generates tension-releasing "comic relief". If placed before a very dramatic scene, a larger emotional jump – say, from joy to tragedy rather than from melancholy to tragedy – will result in a greater emotional response. A light-hearted scene following a very dramatic one would bring the audience "back down to earth" to better assimilate the rest of the action. In *Macbeth*, the humorous Porter interlude between King Duncan's murder and the discovery of his body creates the illusion that the second emotional high is greater than the first because of the "drop" in between.

Ultimately, farce and tragedy are not mutually exclusive and, as demonstrated above, can share other traits.²⁰ Smith goes so far as to state that "farcical situations are, indeed, often tragic situations back to front, or tragic situations viewed in a bizarre

light”.²¹ Norman R. Shapiro quotes Feydeau as saying, “When I am arranging all the madness that unleashes the spectator’s glee, I am not amused by it. I keep the cool calm poise of the chemist measuring out his medicine”.²² And, as quoted by Leonard C. Pronko, Feydeau states:

To make a good *vaudeville*, you take the most tragic situation possible, a situation fit to make a mortician shudder, and you try to bring out its burlesque side. There is no human drama which does not offer at least several comic aspects. That is why authors you call comic are always sad: they think “sad” first.²³

Throughout farce, there is the potential for tragedy and, what differentiates the two, is farce’s unreality and the lack of ultimate consequences. Whereas in a tragedy there is the eventual conclusion of death, in a farce there is the potentially destructive risk of discovery. In a farcical context, discovery would be considered a “fate worse than death” and each such event would be regarded with the same seriousness as a tragic one. The upheaval in a farce is as catastrophic as that of a tragedy. Equally, the violence apparent in such tragedies as *Hamlet* and *Othello* have consequences (death) while the violence in farce is only a part of the action and has no ultimate consequences. Farce and tragedy also contain many “elevated” characters, such as gods in the Ancient Greek plays, and persons of high social status in more modern examples. On the other hand, it is interesting to note that Aristotle describes comedy as being a “*mimesis* of inferior persons”²⁴ suggesting that there is no place for the more elevated “types”.²⁵ Many tragedies can also contain “mad” scenes, where the characters enter the realm of the unreal. Ophelia, in *Hamlet*, is one of many examples, and, like a farce character, she is placed under a spell and is no longer responsible for her actions. Like Ophelia, George Pigden also goes “mad” as he appears to have a nervous breakdown while attempting to extricate himself from his problems. The behaviour of both characters is irrational, yet it makes sense within the context of the plays: Ophelia’s madness is the result of her father’s death, and George’s “madness” is instigated by the situation in which he finds himself. Another similarity is that while in tragedies such as *Hamlet* there is the evil

antagonist (Claudius), the farcical equivalent is the amoral behaviour of the various characters. This behaviour is problematic because, if taken to extremes, it can lead to pain and suffering and become tragic. Thus, the two genres are interrelated, and Maurice Charney goes so far as distinguishing “tragic farce” as a separate genre.²⁶

However, only so much can be inferred from the written text. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, after the festivities Romeo attempts to catch another glimpse of Juliet while being pursued by Mercutio and Benvolio. There is ample witty dialogue between these two characters, but there is also much scope for physical farce, which can only be realised in performance.²⁷ In 1983, Peter Thomson wrote about the welcome “recent shift toward ‘stage-centred’ criticism”.²⁸ This suggests that performance analysis is relatively new. Those who persist in visualising Shakespeare as a “literary genius”, as opposed to a late-sixteenth-century actor/playwright, focus only on the literary - or, written - text, rather than a multitude of potential performance texts. Implicit in the genre hierarchy is the literary hierarchy, which positions performance (and performance criticism) at its base. Nevertheless, Shakespeare was a theatre practitioner and as evident in my example from *Hamlet*, he was not averse to using farcical techniques. Indeed, Charles Boyce considers *The Comedy of Errors* a farce as it makes use of such farcical techniques as “mistaken identity, overheard conversations, accidental encounters, reunions of long-separated people, and extraordinary coincidences”.²⁹ Furthermore, compared to *Errors*’ main source (Plautus’s *Menaechmi*), Shakespeare doubles the farcical action – “the confusions, arguments, threatenings, and thrashings”³⁰ – by borrowing the idea of having two sets of twins from another Plautus play, *Amphitruo*.³¹

It could be argued that Shakespeare chose to work with farce – an allegedly simplistic form – because he was still a young playwright developing his skill.³² Or, one could go entirely in the other direction and – notwithstanding any “inadequacies” – perceive Shakespeare as improving, and hence transcending, his sources. Harold Bloom praises *Errors* by saying that it “does not read or play like apprentice work [and] it is a remarkably sophisticated elaboration of (and improvement upon) Plautus”.³³ However, as Russ McDonald suggests, most contemporary scholars refer to Shakespeare's use of farce to dismiss it, and only focus on the themes “found” in his plays.³⁴ For instance, Bloom places emphasis on the “serious” sections of the play which highlight the dangers inherent in the city of Syracuse and “belie our usual first impressions of *The Comedy of Errors* as a purely rambunctious farce”.³⁵ *Errors* does the opposite to *Hamlet*, and inserts elements of tragedy in farce. However, rather than considering this as a way of enriching a play - as humour does in *Hamlet* – Bloom implies that it is the only aspect of the play which raises it “above” farce. Furthermore, his qualifying use of “purely” in relation to “rambunctious” suggests that if the play were only farce it would be of little worth. Ironically, when farce is used as a foil it is perceived as inferior, whereas when tragedy is used in the same manner, it not only remains positive but also “improves” a play. T. S. Dorsch's interpretation of the play is more positive in relation to its “fun” and farcical side:

The Comedy of Errors is not only very good theatre, it is also very good reading. It is a finely-balanced mixture of pathos and suspense, illusion and delusion, love turned bitter and love that is sweet, farce and fun.³⁶

The Comedy of Errors – and farce in general – cannot be removed from its theatrical context, as this can lead to it being analysed solely from a narrow “literary” point of view.

Shakespeare cannot be removed from the theatrical context, and, as argued by Hyland, one must erase the post-Romantic idea of the “solitary [literary] genius pouring out the dictates of his heart”.³⁷ He was both a professional playwright and actor, and from 1599, a shareholder of the Globe Theatre.³⁸ Provided his plays proved both popular and lucrative, it is doubtful that he would have been too stylistically selective as to what he wrote and/or presented. If farce was as popular then as it is now there is no reason why Shakespeare would not have utilised it. Furthermore, Shakespeare wrote for his company, and all those involved in the rehearsals and performances would have influenced the plays. Importantly, theatre practitioners had to compete with such prevalent visually, and aurally, stimulating entertainments such as cock-fighting, bear-baiting and public executions. The actors performed in broad daylight in the Globe and other “outdoor” theatres, or by candlelight in the indoor theatres. The proscenium arch did not exist in England, and the distinct division between actors and audience was not yet present. Thus, the two had an intimate relationship,³⁹ with the spectators making their opinions of a performance very clear. The actors would have interacted with the audience, often improvising on the spot and adding comic, or farcical, routines. Hamlet’s line “let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them” (3.2.38-9) suggests the “clowns” were in the habit of altering the text for “cheap” laughs. Nevertheless, Shakespeare’s plays have minimal stage directions, which could result in one incorrectly deducing that Shakespeare’s players relied only on the verbal. In reality, the dialogue is characterised by much visual imagery. Peter Hyland places emphasis on the importance for the Shakespeare student of reading a play and ensuring understanding before going to see it. (A play first performed almost 500 years ago does contain words and phrases which no longer make sense to a modern audience and require an explanation.)⁴⁰ However, one should not be misguided to focus entirely on the literary, as there is more to performance than simply reading and understanding a

text. As Ralph Berry points out, in performance the spectator is not presented with the literary text, and the actors' physicality and line delivery further influence how a production is interpreted.⁴¹ A performance is an experience, where the acting, direction, lighting, costume design, set design, music/sound design, set properties and the myriad other influences all come together as a whole.

In a similar manner, farce can often appear quite dull on the page and "come to life" on stage.⁴² Eric Bentley quotes from an unnamed source that "farce has small literary merit, but great entertainment value",⁴³ and, as pointed out by Davis – notwithstanding critical disdain – farce has remained popular with audiences.⁴⁴ Bermel goes further, to state that "farce is by its nature popular: it makes a gut appeal to the entire spectrum of the public, from illiterates to intellectuals".⁴⁵ Nevertheless, literary "quality" and performance "quality" are both highly arbitrary. And, as stated at the start of this chapter, Baker claims that farce rarely undergoes theoretical analysis because its "frivolous devotion to amusement, and its apparent irrationality" make it more difficult to analyse from a literary paradigm.⁴⁶ In other words, the "comic" tools of analysis fail when scrutinising farce, and its characteristics are seen as negative because they are not those of comedy. Farce, says Baker, could be seen as "undisciplined, vulgar, grotesque, or irrational".⁴⁷ However, as discussed in chapter one, farce has its own generic conventions and it is incorrect to compare it to, say comedy, and decide it is the inferior genre because it is not comedy.

Performance is "literature" made practical: a living, breathing entity, which embodies the potential of the dramatic text. As pointed out by David Taylor, the Greek word for drama means "doing", not watching or reading.⁴⁸ It is illogical to assume a playwright would write a play for the sole purpose of having it studied, analysed and

dissected by generations of academics attempting to draw out some hidden meaning, or gain a “divine” revelation. It must be noted that all dramatic genres – not only farce – are influenced by performance. Therefore, the belief that farce is lower down on the hierarchical scale because it “improves” only once performed is unfounded. It is more useful to recognise a play as being written for performance, and that it is always incomplete in the written form. Furthermore, as all productions of a particular play are different, each will remain “incomplete” as there can never be a “definitive” version. It is this instability of the performed “text” which makes it difficult for literary scholars to gauge its worth. Compared to the performance text, the written text is relatively stable, and it is no surprise if scholars ignore, or denigrate, the former because of its instability and mutability. The focus on performance and the physical can be criticised as permitting the action to “take over”, and belittle the verbal text.⁴⁹ This applies particularly to farce with its focus on physical humour, where the distinction between “cheap laughs” and “proper farce” is a tenuous one, making it difficult to draw the line. I would argue that any clowning which interferes with the main action falls in the former category.⁵⁰ However, an actor may succumb to equally counterproductive “stand and deliver” acting, which may be considered static and boring. For example, with no dynamic action,⁵¹ act one, scene one of *Hamlet* could be reduced to a group of people in a performance space telling the audience plot information. Nevertheless, it is incorrect to interpret the physical/visual aspects of farce as simplistic as its practice and themes are both multifaceted and comprehensive. As stated by Charney when discussing tragic farce:

Without the stage action, the dialogue often seems wooden and the characters lifeless, and the marvellous effects of acceleration and snowballing are hard to grasp from the words on the printed page.⁵²

To understand the full impact of the physical, I now turn to *Commedia dell’Arte* to demonstrate the intricacy that performance can attain.

Commedia dell'Arte

A *Commedia dell'Arte* performance would not have been considered a farce in the same manner as a Ray Cooney play is now. Tragedy, comedy and melodrama would have also been a part of the *Commedia* repertoire. Nevertheless, judging by contemporary paintings, an emphasis would appear to have been placed on the physicality and buffoonery of the various characters, implying a degree of slapstick. I see *Commedia* as a defining moment in the history of farce because of the various characteristics it inherited from the Ancients, moulded them to suit its purposes, and then passed on to future generations of playwrights and performers. Like farce, *Commedia* placed a great emphasis on its entertainment value, stressing its physicality while being regarded as a non-literary theatrical form. Furthermore, I describe *Commedia* as non-literary in order to distinguish it from the so-called “learned” theatre (*Commedia Erudita*) practised by amateurs such as scholars and courtiers in the context of academies and courts of patrons, where, during the Renaissance, the rediscovery of many ancient Greek and Roman plays saw a revival in both their study and performance.⁵³ Considered “sacred” by humanist philosophers and scholars, these ancient scripted plays were considered far superior to the popular entertainments being practised in many parts of Europe and were restricted to the educated elite.

On the other hand, *Commedia* consisted of small troupes of professional actors performing to the masses on portable stages in the piazzas and streets of European cities.⁵⁴ Unlike those “newly discovered” plays, *Commedia* was not scripted line-by-line and became known – as it is today – as improvised theatre. However, *Commedia* was not “improvised” in the modern sense of the word, where it is generally taken to mean an actor, or actors, being given a scenario, line or idea, which is instantly devised

into a scene without prior rehearsal. (Perhaps a better term would be “spontaneous theatre”.) If anything was written down, it comprised of a scene-by-scene description of the plot. These are known as *scenari* or *soggetti*,⁵⁵ and one fanciful legend involves a “script” being attached to a wall in the “wings” to assist the actors in remembering the plot. Richards and Richards note that there are over eight hundred of these *scenari* in existence. While some are quite detailed – even suggesting what stage properties, costumes, and entrances/exits should be used – others only outline the general framework for a play.⁵⁶ These are by no means blueprints, but “are at best guides for actors, and when read today may conceal much more than they reveal”.⁵⁷ As will be demonstrated, while Commedia created the illusion of being fully improvised, practitioners who were highly skilled in all its different nuances rehearsed it heavily, many having performed Commedia their whole lives. Role specialization was common, and the occupation of “actor” was often handed down from one generation to the next with the “student” acting as an apprentice.⁵⁸ These performers highlight how only actors skilled in their craft can “complete” a text through performance.

A crucial component, which gave Commedia a feeling of spontaneity, were the *lazzi*.⁵⁹ Ironically, although they gave Commedia an improvised feel, they were heavily rehearsed and, as stated by Mel Gordon, “functioned as independent routines that more often than not interrupted or unravelled the Commedia plots or performance unity”.⁶⁰ Thus, these routines were inserted as needed. Gordon highlights Constant Mic’s division of the use of the *lazzi*:⁶¹ first, the *lazzo* would be added into the action of the play if the audience were becoming restless or an actor forgot his/her line or cue. The *lazzo* could even be inserted to enliven the end of a scene by adding some unrelated hilarity. The second category included *lazzi* which the audience expected to see, and would thus be “written in” especially, to act as high-points in the performance.

Nevertheless, they would still have no direct connection to the story line. The third category, like the second, included *lazzi* initially contrived for a specific Commedia text, but which had become part of the action. A *lazzo* which was overly long or became an integrated part of the plot line was known as a *burla* or *jeu*.⁶²

It is not known how a *lazzo* would be initiated while on stage. Most of the *lazzi* of the second and third categories would most probably have been arranged during rehearsal. Conversely, if an actor were alone on stage it would be relatively easy to add a *lazzo* when the audience's attention started to drift. When there were a number of actors on stage, the instigator of the *lazzo* might have given a verbal or physical cue, which would alert the other performers to go through the motions of a particular *lazzo*. The *lazzi* were never written down by the acting troupes themselves, perhaps for fear of plagiarism.⁶³ (According to Gordon, "performance use of the *lazzo* [generally] precedes its written description by twenty years or more".⁶⁴) After years of performance, professional Commedia actors were most probably so in tune with their craft that they had no need to write down their routines. As with the *lazzi*, over time, an actor could become so familiar with a *scenario* that the lines would become relatively constant. Furthermore, if an actor came up with a highly successful line or routine while on stage, he/she would repeat it at future performances.

As with the practitioners of scripted drama, who considered ancient dramatic texts to exemplify the "definitive" dramatic form, the Commedia actors would incorporate what they considered "quality" plot lines, set pieces and speeches of existing works into their performance. There is evidence that the original *comici*, or actors, were very literate as well as skilled in many different performing arts. For example, a popular author to plagiarise was Boccaccio and extracts from his works

could be used as rousing speeches, for comedy, or simply to highlight an actor's ability to perform that author's work. Nonetheless, although much material was recycled, no two Commedia performances would be as similar as two scripted performances. Although there are only a few examples of Commedia dialogue in existence, they – like the outlines for the *lazzi* – were most probably written down after they had been devised and performed. The most famous collection is that of Andrea Perucci who recorded examples of the verbal aspect of Commedia in his 1699 book *Dell'arte rappresentativa*.⁶⁵ Read out of context they offer few clues as to how they were actually performed, but they do give a glimpse of the verbal skills of the actors.

In spite of the importance of plot and dialogue, over the years the focus has moved away from the story lines to the physicality of the stage action, in particular the slapstick element. I suggest two main reasons: first, as has already been suggested, the “improvisational” nature of the genre resulted in a lack of a formal written tradition. Second, Commedia's abundant iconographic representations focus on its most prominent visual feature: the mask, which can have a powerful effect on an actor. As pointed out by Richards and Richards, there has been “much speculation about the psychological and philosophical properties of masks, their power to transform and liberate the creative imagination of the player donning one”.⁶⁶ Keith Johnstone goes so far as suggesting that a mask will enable an actor to “let go”, be taken over by the “spirit” of the mask, and lose any performance inhibitions.⁶⁷ Actors are not only “possessed” by the character, but also by the mask, driving their own personalities out of them.⁶⁸ In essence, a mask “covers up” the reality of the person behind it. A modern parallel could be make-up or costuming. As an example, Johnstone states:

A journalist called Bill Richardson told me that he'd been asked to take part in a circus matinee as one of the clowns...Once the make-up was on he became "possessed" and found himself able to tumble about, catch his feet in buckets, and so on, as if he'd been a clown in another incarnation. He stayed with the circus for some weeks, but he never got the same feeling without the make-up.⁶⁹

Whether or not an actor (or journalist) becomes "possessed", is open to debate. However, what cannot be denied is the power of a "mask" to transform – to varying degrees – the person wearing it. David Griffiths suggests that a mask induces actors to both instantly assume a role, while relying on their entire physicality.⁷⁰ From a spectator's point of view, rather than focusing on a specific characteristic, an audience would focus on the actor as a whole. Furthermore, a costume and mask can create "stock characters" immediately recognisable to an audience. With Commedia, the masks' personalities would have been developed over the years. And, with each new generation, the masks became springboards from which to "launch" a performance imbued with a performer's own particular acting talents and individual style. Richards and Richards state:

The roles of improvised drama [were] at once specific and general, imbued by the actor in performance with individual traits, but at the same time rooted in tradition, regionally distinctive and embodying the essential features of groups recognizable in society: the prosperous, self-assured citizen or well-to-do merchant, the fussy, garrulous pedant or professional man, the ingenious and scheming servant or obtuse and bumbling servant; sufficiently Catholic in short to permit the players to exploit their different performer characteristics, idiosyncrasies and skills, but sufficiently defined to be stable and recurring through the history of Commedia dell'Arte.⁷¹

Gordon provides an accurate summary of the character "types" in Commedia. He divides them into three categories: the serious, semi-serious and the "comic". The serious are mainly the unmasked lovers;⁷² the old men or masters are the semi-serious, who are usually masked; and finally there are the masked "comic" characters, comprising of the masked servants (known collectively as *zanni*) and the valets.⁷³ In light of my further research (from Richards and Richards) I would add the unmasked *servette*, or female servants, to the semi-serious category. Each group had a specific role to play. The lovers had to carry the plot and were thus fully integrated in the storyline. The older men, although being central to the action, had certain eccentric or

exaggerated character traits which moved them outside the lovers' reality, making them partially unreal. For example, *Pantalone* could either be an impossibly stingy and over-strict father, or a man constantly attempting – and failing – to seduce a beautiful young woman. The *servette* would help the lovers in their schemes against the old men, and the *zanni*⁷⁴ were mainly there for “comic relief”. The old men could at times be just as humorous, but the *zanni*, although a part of the plot, survived on a different level to everyone else.⁷⁵

As I have argued, unreality is integral to farce, and many of the *zanni*'s antics were “unreal” and revolved around the more simple farcical forms. Therefore, it is not surprising for the characters considered less “real” to be removed even further from reality by wearing masks. As a modern equivalent, without his “tramp” outfit, Charlie Chaplin's performance as the tramp would be incomplete. Harpo Marx minus the frizzy blonde hair, damaged top hat, creased clothes and honking bladder would remain Arthur Marx. Peter Sellers without his moustache, “detective's outfit” and French accent would no longer be Jacques Clouseau. Commedia, and these three modern examples, exemplify character-driven farce.⁷⁶ Baker aptly describes such characters as “clowns” because of their masks. Furthermore, he argues that these masks are not superficial coverings but the essence of their personalities, “a combination of external signs which give him [*sic*] identity For him they are vital, without them he does not exist, for he is a creature of the theatre”.⁷⁷

As stated in the previous chapter, in a playwright-driven farce the flaws are external, forcing a “real” character to cope with an “unreal” situation. Conversely, the clowns in a character-driven farce do the opposite. They are “unreal”, while attempting to survive in a “real” situation. Baker describes clowns as treating the world and

everything in it as their own private toy, preferring to “destroy and re-create in their own image”.⁷⁸ This produces individuals who – to varying degrees – are unable to fully participate in the “real” world. According to Baker, Chaplin’s tramp will forever remain excluded from the “real” world, but “in spite of the myriad disasters and humiliations he experiences” he will always survive them.⁷⁹ On the other hand, Buster Keaton, “achieves a high degree of integration”, because although his deadpan face expresses no emotion, it also “has the reality of a photograph”.⁸⁰ Harpo, and the other Marx brothers, - while remaining apart from the other characters – are parasites which “invade the body of a conventional comedy, graft themselves onto a stereotypical comic plot, and systematically convert it into an elaborate plaything”.⁸¹ Nonetheless, character-driven and playwright-driven farces are not mutually exclusive. For example, Jacques Clouseau in the *Pink Panther* series has a catastrophic influence on the world around him, brought about through a mixture of his own naïve ineptitude to function properly in his society and his accident-prone behaviour caused, on some occasions, by bad luck. As Baker states, this aspect explains, “why the *Commedia*, although it did not exclude any genre – even tragedy – from its province, is associated so closely with farce”.⁸²

From these examples, it is clear that the legacy of *Commedia dell’Arte* has had far-reaching effects right into our own century. However, with no accurate description of how to perform a *scenario* – coupled with the lack of a lifetime’s knowledge of *Commedia* acting upon which to draw – it is impossible to replicate the work of the original players. Some attempts have been made to re-stage *Commedia* by such groups as the TAG Teatro of Venice and the Carrara family. On the other hand, as stated by Christopher Cairns, Dario Fo has endeavoured to re-contextualise *Commedia* so it may fit “contemporary social and political causes of a deep-rooted European theatrical

tradition”.⁸³ Nevertheless, a twenty-first century audience does not need to recreate Commedia in order to see many of its techniques in practice. For example, the farces of Molière and Goldoni benefited directly from the Commedia techniques, while those of Shakespeare were influenced indirectly.

According to Richards and Richards, at the time of Jean-Baptiste Poquelin’s birth in 1622 (Molière after 1644), Commedia was a very popular form of entertainment which had existed in France for many years.⁸⁴ Using H. Gaston Hall’s chronology as a guide, in 1661 Molière and his troupe began performing at the Palais-Royal in Paris after having toured France since 1646 where they would have had the opportunity to come into contact with many Italian players.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Molière’s familiarity with Commedia would have increased by having to share the Palais-Royal with the Commedia actors employed by the theatre. Richards and Richards raise an important point:

Notwithstanding that a number of Italian players learnt French and were capable of performing in that language, the focus of improvised composition and performance moved away from the verbal to the physical, and the range of their repertoires, scripted and improvised, became drastically more confined.⁸⁶

From this, one can presume that the Commedia with which Molière was acquainted comprised of even more slapstick than that performed in Italy at the time. As an example, the extremely physical scene from *Les Fourberies de Scapin* described in chapter one could be taken straight out of Commedia. By changing the names from Scapin and Geronte, to *Arlecchino* and *Pantalone*, the scene could either be a *lazzo* or *burla*. In effect, Molière formalised Commedia by recording it on paper.

Whereas Molière had employed Commedia freely in his farces and comedies, Goldoni (1707 – 1793) attempted to distance himself from the genre. As pointed out by Eugene Steele, by the early-eighteenth century, Commedia was then in decline.

Goldoni was confronted with what he considered to be a “vulgar and obscene” theatrical style which began to “pall on increasingly refined audiences”.⁸⁷ Goldoni described the professional Italian players of his day as abusing the theatre with bad plays and he set himself the task of reforming the then declining improvised Italian theatre. However, Goldoni’s theatrical “revolution” did not occur overnight. He knew that Commedia was still popular in Italy and with every play he wrote he – gradually – attempted to eliminate the masks, remove what he considered to be the vulgar farcical aspects, eliminate improvisation, and make the action more “realistic”. Timothy Holme puts it most succinctly when he writes:

If one were to sum up the Goldoni reform in a sentence, one might say that, over a period of years, he transformed a decaying actors’ theatre into a living writers’ one. He threw the old scenarios out of the window – although he never shut it very firmly on them, they kept on fluttering back. He started writing his dialogue down and making the actors, often with great reluctance, learn it by heart. He eschewed bawdry, rhetoric and forced lines or situations, and he embraced naturalism with all his heart.⁸⁸

In 1745, the actor Antonio Sacchi, asked Goldoni to write a comedy based on various *scenari*. Goldoni produced *Il Servitore di due Padroni* (*The Servant of Two Masters*). This was a success and would later be written down in full. As suggested by Holme, it is a “half-way house between the *Commedia dell’Arte* and the new comedy of character containing, it could be argued, the best of both worlds”.⁸⁹ Later plays, such as *Il Ventaglio*, eliminated all the Commedia characters producing a much more realistic and refined farce. However, by working against the genre, Goldoni indirectly acknowledged its influence. Molière and Goldoni present two farcical extremes. With *Scapin*, Molière exploited the slapstick aspect of farce, and Goldoni, with *Il Ventaglio*, worked from the less violent – but no less physically demanding – situations involving character misunderstandings. Therefore, it can be argued that late in his career, Goldoni was recording Commedia *scenari* without the *lazzi*. As discussed earlier, the storylines were very important in Commedia, as were the characters that carried them.

Consequently, Goldoni would most likely have kept those aspects of Commedia he approved of, and discarded the others.

In order to further comprehend the influence of Commedia, I will briefly explore the impact it had on theatre practices in Elizabethan England, a society which did not have it as a direct part of its culture. In doing so I will necessarily condense what well deserves a much larger exposition into a few pertinent examples. Boyce asserts that travelling Italian companies performed there in the 1570s and 1580s,⁹⁰ and Louise George Clubb claims that there has been a “long history of intimate relationship between regular [written] comedy and Commedia dell’arte”.⁹¹ Furthermore, in 1592 Thomas Nash defended English theatre against the Puritan censors by saying,

Our Players are not as the players beyond the Sea - a sort of squirting bawdie Comedians that haue whores and common Curtizens to playe womens partes, and forbear no immodest speech or vnchast action that may procure laughter -; but our Sceane is more statelie furnisht than euer it was in the time of *Roscius*, our representations honourable and full of gallant resolution, not consisting, like theirs, of a pantaloun, a Whore, and a Zanie, but of Emperours, Kings, and Princes; whose true Tragedies...they do vaunt.⁹²

From this quotation, it could be argued that in the late-sixteenth century, tragedy was seemingly better respected than comedy or farce. However, Nash’s statement is to a great extent pro-theatrical – and nationalistic – propaganda, and much of what he criticised was being utilised by the playwrights and players. Hyland claims that an Elizabethan playgoer did not go to see plays by a specific playwright, but those plays which featured popular actors.⁹³ Richard Burbage was possibly the most famous actor in Shakespeare’s company and, according to Phyllis Hartnoll, originated such famous dramatic roles as Hamlet, King Lear and Othello.⁹⁴ However, as stated by Hyland, “apart from Burbage, the best-known members of Shakespeare’s company were the comedians”.⁹⁵

The popularity of the “clowns”, together with the following four direct Shakespearean references to Commedia indicate the diversity farce was able to achieve. In *The Taming of the Shrew* Lucentio – disguised as Cambio, a Latin teacher – secretly woos Bianca in order to get past her father and her other two wooers. In the lesson scene, he says:

“*Hic ibat*”, as I told you before, “*Simois*”, I am Lucentio, “*hic est*”, son unto Vicentio of Pisa, “*Sigeia tellus*”, disguised thus to get your love; “*Hic steterat*”, and that Lucentio that comes wooing, “*Priami*”, is my man Tranio, “*regia*”, bearing my port, “*celsa senis*”, that we might beguile the old pantaloon”. (3.1.30-34)⁹⁶

Lucentio describes Bianca’s father as an “old pantaloon” and he suggests to her that they “beguile” him. As pointed out above, many of the Commedia *scenari* involved deceiving the older *Pantalone* through some sort of trick by his daughter or young wife and – in many cases – her lover. Furthermore, role swapping was a common Commedia (and farcical) practice.⁹⁷ The servant would act as a decoy by wooing his master’s beloved in public while he (the master) would do so in private. Her other suitors would be so busy trying to counter the efforts of the pretend-suitor that they would be oblivious to the efforts of the disguised real suitor. Shakespeare may also have been inspired by the *lazzo* of the Latin “translation”.⁹⁸ Further Commedia references are found in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* when Berowne describes Boyet as a *zanni*, or comic servant:

Some carry-tale, some please-man, some slight zany,
Some mumble-news, some trencher-knight, some Dick,
That smiles his cheek in years, and knows the trick
To make my lady laugh when she’s disposed. (5.2.463-466)⁹⁹

This speech suggests that the *zanni*’s role, in farce, is to induce laughter in others through his/her various antics. Furthermore, in *Twelfth Night* Malvolio says, “I protest I take these wise men that crow so at these set kind of fools no better than the fools’ zanies” (1.5.71-72),¹⁰⁰ insulting Maria and Feste for behaving like the “clowns” in Commedia. The above examples not only demonstrate Shakespeare’s knowledge of Commedia but also that – through the lack of any form of explanation – the audience

would have been familiar with them. Through the course of the play, Malvolio becomes farcical as the other characters deceive him into behaving foolishly. Although elevated above the other servants, the laughter directed at him transforms Malvolio into one of the “zanies” he so despises. Furthermore, Malvolio is also a “type” because of his one-track mind and singleness of purpose. He is a pedant who annoys characters like Sir Toby through his disapproval of Toby’s behaviour, and then with his fixation on wooing Olivia. His wearing of cross-gartered yellow stockings when he finally courts her moves him into unreality by being far removed from the reality of the scene, and his every-day personality and dress-sense. Like *Arlecchino*’s mask and outfit, the garters and yellow stockings set him apart and he becomes the outsider or clown. He is considered mad by the others and imprisoned for his own safety. Both actions “remove” him from the “real” world and any unfair behaviour directed at him becomes humorous through its unreality.

Finally, as stated by Grewar, “Shakespeare’s only other direct reference to the masks” – Jaques’ description of the seven ages of man in *As You Like It* – “shows most clearly his acquaintance with them”.¹⁰¹ In his speech, Jaques describes four of the main Commedia characters: the lover – for example, Romeo and Juliet, Beatrice and Benedick; the soldier – a braggart captain – who, Boyce argues, could be likened to such characters as Falstaff;¹⁰² the “justice”, or doctor, a pompous know-it-all (Holofernes in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*); and finally *Pantalone*, an “avaricious and lecherous old man, often a miser offering windy and moralistic advice to young lovers”.¹⁰³ Polonius could be interpreted as either *Pantalone* or a combination of the doctor and *Pantalone*. And, as described above, Malvolio could start off as a *Pantalone*-type figure and then become a *zanni*.

Modern plays may no longer be titled after the major characteristic of its protagonist – such as Molière’s *l’Avare*, or, *The Miser*, (1668) – however, many farcical characters are governed by a set personality which influences all they do and say. The brief character descriptions found at the beginning of many modern farce scripts help an actor gain an instant understanding of a role. For example, in Cooney and Hilton’s *One for the Pot*, the four characters played by the one actor are described as follows:

BILLY HICKORY WOOD – A shy, lovable North Country lad.

RUPERT HICKORY WOOD – A well-spoken young man who, when agitated, gets tongue tied.

MICHAEL HICKORY WOOD – An unscrupulous but likeable Irish rogue.

PIERRE HICKORY WOOD – A volatile Frenchman.¹⁰⁴

The above character descriptions could imply that farce is very simplistic. However, it must be understood that, as with the Commedia characters, an individual’s basic “type” is only the stimulus for a performance. It is up to the actor to create a three-dimensional character from that basic “type” – be it Arlecchino, Polonius, Malvolio, Susanna or Billy Hickory Wood.

A final connection between Commedia, Shakespeare and modern farce is the influence of the performer on the written text. As stated previously, the Commedia actors, depending on their acting skills, would find themselves suited – or be the heirs – to a particular character. Shakespeare worked in reverse. As pointed out by Grewar, Shakespeare wrote the various roles with members of his company in mind.¹⁰⁵ Prior to 1599, William Kempe was a leading actor in Shakespeare’s company.¹⁰⁶ He was a large man who specialised in performing the bumbling physical clown and was reputedly a skilled dancer.¹⁰⁷ Then, in 1599, Kempe left the troupe and was replaced by Robert Armin. This resulted in Shakespeare’s farcical/comical characters becoming quite different. Armin was a small man “better cast as a clever fool”¹⁰⁸ and was given songs to sing. He originated such characters as Feste, Touchstone and the fool in *King Lear*, who made use of verbal wit, often with shrewd wordplay and clever arguments. Thus,

while Kempe relied on physical farce in his performances, Armin was a comedian, using wit rather than humour. Nevertheless, according to Hyland, Armin was a truly versatile actor who was able to perform the more physical Kempe roles when earlier plays were revived,¹⁰⁹ suggesting the continued popularity of the farcical characters. Similarly, modern farces can also be written for certain actors. For instance, the Whitehall farces of the 1950s and early 1960s were written for the actor-manager Brian Rix. And, as I shall argue in chapter three, the character of Basil Fawlty in *Fawlty Towers* – co-written and performed by John Cleese – is a prime example of a role written for a particular actor.

The importance of the relationship between performance and the audience can never be underestimated, and, as stated by Smith “last minute improvisation and collaboration are not uncommon”.¹¹⁰ For instance, according to Smith, the initial reaction to the climax in John Chapman’s *Dry Rot* (1954) – two con-men listening to the broadcast of a horse-race – received a “lukewarm reception”.¹¹¹ This resulted in the cast and author developing the action by incorporating the “radio scene” with a “tea scene” in order to add some farcical business. While, as Smith argues, the action in this scene is “quite extraneous to the farcical situation, and was grafted on to conceal the weaknesses in the script”,¹¹² it does demonstrate how the physical can add to a scene rather than make it inferior. If performance is considered “living, breathing” literature, then farce is the ultimate performance experience where all theatrical aspects must work together perfectly and effortlessly to produce a flawless creation. Therefore, to further demonstrate the inclusiveness of the farcical genre, in what follows, I shall briefly return to my discussion on theatrical hierarchies, through exploring the place of theatre in the medieval world. In particular, Medieval carnival, with its blurring of

performer/audience roles, and its invocation of the grotesque (as demonstrated through the works of Mikhail Bakhtin), have pertinent connections to my analysis of farce.

Bermel states that after the fall of the Roman Empire, the Roman Catholic Church attempted to suppress theatre completely.¹¹³ Nevertheless, it was kept alive through travelling performers such as “acrobats, dancers, mimics, animal-trainers with bears and monkeys, jugglers, wrestlers, ballad singers, [and] story tellers”.¹¹⁴ In being masterless and unattached, these performers were believed to spread sedition and rebellion by being a potential threat to the status quo.¹¹⁵ In an English context:

The lampoons these strollers sang against unpopular people in high places may have modestly contributed to, say, the Peasants’ Rising in 1381 or the revolt led by Jack Cade in 1450, and other local riots. From the time of the Black Death, in the years after 1349, they were constantly threatened with the stocks, the whipping post, and jail.¹¹⁶

However, as stated by James Keller, as early as the ninth century, the church began to use theatrical performance within its church services.¹¹⁷ Alluding to this practice, Bermel refers to it as educational “propaganda”.¹¹⁸ Over the years, even the priest-actors appreciated audience reaction and would “push for audible reactions – that is, laughs”.¹¹⁹ Keller points out that the dramatic productions began to compete with the church services and in the thirteenth century were moved first outside the churches and then away from them.¹²⁰ Keller highlights the irony that an institution, which for so many years had suppressed the theatre, should be responsible for its European rebirth.¹²¹ By the late middle ages, drama had become a varied art form. For example, Knight divides medieval drama into two groups: historical genres and fictional genres.¹²² Historical genres can be of Biblical history, profane history, or tales of the lives of Saints, and fictional genres are either morality plays or farces. The morality plays are either personal moralities, which “trace the career of the human protagonist from birth to death on the pilgrimage of life”,¹²³ or institutional moralities where “the protagonists are allegorical representations of institutions”.¹²⁴ The farces are then separated into

typical farces – where the characters are “types” rather than individuals (for example, in the work of Hans Sachs) – and allegorical farces. These are then divided into either *farce moralisée* or *sotties*. The former “represents a world gone wrong” with the characters unable to escape it, and the latter “represents a stance apart from the world gone wrong peopled with wise or benign fools, clowns, and acrobats whose function is to reveal, ridicule, and censure the folly around them”.¹²⁵ This distinction is further drawn out in Davis’ demarcation between these two forms. The *farce moralisée*, “[r]estricting itself to a more generalized kind of comic [*sic*] mimicry” escaped censure and endured, whereas the *sottie*, in its invocation of political satire against ruling power figures – in that behind the “masks” of all such dominant personages lurked the sot, or fool – was perceived as dangerous to the status quo, and its actors were imprisoned or punished in various ways.¹²⁶ Finally, as pointed out by Davis, these “fool societies” of actors “dressed as *sots* in their parti-coloured costumes with cap and bells” were suppressed by the mid-sixteenth century, whereas farce “proved a more long-lasting vehicle for lively fun” and exists to this day.¹²⁷

Medieval Carnival

However, to fully understand farce and how its characteristics operate in both medieval and modern plays, it is important to explore the medieval folk humour which existed alongside the various theatrical forms. Focusing on the works of the late-medieval writer François Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin outlines three forms:

1. *Ritual spectacles*: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.
2. *Comic verbal compositions*: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and the vernacular.
3. *Various genres of billingsgate*: curses, oaths, popular blazons.¹²⁸

Folk humour shares with farce the characteristic of being seen as belonging to the “common” people while holding a fascination for all social levels. Because of the

visual element, my focus will be on the Ritual spectacles, in particular the carnival pageants, common to many parts of medieval Europe.

Medieval carnivals were a visual and aural celebration of life. According to Knight, the carnival season, which “began with Christmas and the Feast of Fools and ended with Mardi Gras and Ash Wednesday” was a celebration of the end of winter and was marked, in the “popular tradition” by “hierarchical inversions” and “reversions to childhood”.¹²⁹ It is important to note that these carnivalesque inversions of hierarchical positionality were only ever temporary deviations from aristocratic and religious order – a permitted “safety-valve” against potentially more dangerous subversions of societal rigidity. As Davis points out, rather than being directly initiated by the masses, they were controlled from the top – a period of Bakhtinian “licensed indulgence”.¹³⁰

The forms of these medieval carnivals had developed from ancient religious festivals – in particular the Roman Saturnalias, which had, in turn, derived from Ancient Greek spectacles. According to Bakhtin, the celebrants of those ancient festivals believed that “the serious and comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally ‘official’”.¹³¹ In other words, the focus of their celebration – the god Dionysus – was both honoured and derided. As pointed out by Davis, these festivals most probably included a “burlesque impersonation of gods, heroes and even local characters”.¹³² These later developed into the comic theatre of Ancient Greece. The freedom inherent in those festivals is mirrored in the Old Comedy plays of Aristophanes, which can be both vulgar and insulting, with his satirical comments being directed at anyone and anything.¹³³ Nonetheless, all theatrical performances were dedicated to Dionysus, and during the fifth-century BCE, the theatres, according to F. H. Sandbach, had an altar to the god in the centre of the orchestra (a dancing floor

where the chorus would perform) and a front-row seat reserved for Dionysus's priest.¹³⁴ However, the growth in Ancient Greek theatre did not spell the end of those festivals. With the Roman Saturnalia, and then Medieval carnival, "ritual laughter" was "transferred ... to a nonofficial level", and became an "expression of folk consciousness, of folk culture".¹³⁵

The Roman carnivals were slowly adapted to fit in with the religious festivals of the Catholic Church, with the focus of their ridicule being the religious practices of the day. As stated by Davis, one example was the "Feast of Fools", or "Feast of the Ass". This festival was a post-Christmas carnival celebrated from the religious Feast of St Stephen on the 26 December until the Feast of the Circumcision (1 January).¹³⁶ According to Sue Vice, carnival was a spectacle without an audience, or footlights.¹³⁷ Everyone and everything "lived" in this purposefully "created" new reality. Thus, carnival could be seen from two opposing points of view: as an anti-theatre because of its elimination of the audience, or as the ultimate theatrical experience forcing all to be involved in its carnivalesque "reality".¹³⁸ Farce comprises a similar binary as, through the creation of its own reality, the boundary separating the actor from the spectator is negligible. Both feed off each other in order to energise the performance. An audience can never be completely ignored. And, as suggested by Bermel, an animated audience will encourage the actors to perform with more vigour, whereas "a cool audience usually earns only a tepid response".¹³⁹ For carnival – and farce – to work, all the participants must enter into the "spirit" of the occasion by becoming – to varying degrees – a part of the action.

The next important steps in creating their new "reality", involve both carnival and farce subverting hierarchies to establish strong links with laughter. Bakhtin stresses

that the medieval world was a serious one. Fear and oppression were a part of everyday life, and laughter, believed to be a demonic creation, had no place in both the religious and social aspects of society.¹⁴⁰ Nonetheless, Bakhtin asserts that laughter is an integral part of the human existence, a rebellious force, which overcomes both fear and oppression because it “knows no inhibitions, no boundaries. Its idiom is never used by violence and authority”.¹⁴¹ Laughter signifies joy, freedom and abandonment. Stock phrases like “I laughed ’til my sides hurt”, and “I laughed ’til I cried” evoke not only pleasurable memories, but also a release from societal constraints as one relinquishes bodily control to laughter. It is no surprise that the medieval church frowned upon such behaviour, as surrendering to laughter could be likened to succumbing to sin. Carnival mocked, ridiculed and parodied “all that was consecrated and [usually] forbidden”,¹⁴² and revelled in the debasement of hierarchy. Bakhtin states that, “not only schoolmen and minor clerics but hierarchs and learned theologians indulged in gay recreation as relaxation from pious seriousness”.¹⁴³ This brief period of hierarchical freedom is coupled by the phenomenon of degrading and, as stated by Vice, bringing “down to earth”¹⁴⁴ those “sacred cows” of society. Bakhtin described this levelling of medieval society as grotesque realism, stating that:

The essential principle governing grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity.¹⁴⁵

In other words, for Bakhtin, one cannot go any lower, or to an entity simpler than the body:

To degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth.¹⁴⁶

The naked body symbolises equality, because beneath one’s clothes, all individuals are the same. A king is physically clothed in his state robes, and metaphorically clothed – and protected – by his status. Nevertheless, his body remains human. Therefore, when

exploring the medieval world of Rabelais's literature, Bakhtin stresses that the "material bodily principle, that is, images of the body with its food, drink, defecation, and sexual life, plays a predominant role Images of the body are offered ... in an extremely exaggerated form",¹⁴⁷ making it simultaneously real and unreal. However, to understand why Bakhtin would describe this phenomenon as "grotesque realism" I must first define the grotesque.

Philip Thomson provides a succinct definition of the grotesque as being "*the unresolved clash of incompatibilities in work and response*".¹⁴⁸ In other words, if something is grotesque it creates confusion and an inability to identify it because of the "clash between incompatible reactions".¹⁴⁹ For example, according to Thomson, the most common grotesque association is that of the comic – or humorous – with the terrifying. Thomson further describes the grotesque as "*the ambivalently abnormal*",¹⁵⁰ which echoes Geoffrey Harpham who says, "when we use the word 'grotesque' we record, among other things, the sense that though our attention has been arrested, our understanding is unsatisfied".¹⁵¹ To Harpham, a grotesque object, action, piece of literature, and so on, is a "non-thing"¹⁵² because there is no word, which can describe it adequately. The two forms which create it, "appear not as a partnership, but as warfare, as struggle".¹⁵³ Furthermore, to be grotesque, the clash between opposing characteristics must be believable. No matter how extravagant and exaggerated it may be, if the boundaries of believability are broken, the grotesque will cease to exist. Thomson argues that in fantasy, everything is possible as there is no "clash of incompatibles", and hence, there is no ambivalent reaction and the grotesque cannot exist.¹⁵⁴ However, what is "real" to one person may not be "real" to another, and, as Thomson states, three reactions are possible: a complete rejection of what is observed, a fascination with it, or a combination of both: the grotesque.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, as stated earlier, grotesque realism

within a carnival setting is characterised by being both real and unreal. It flaunts and degrades society, leaving the predicament of deciding how to interpret its many manifestations which are very much evident in farce.

As Bermel proposes, farce works on the audience's "democratic impulses", as it is able to reverse roles and "bring the smugly successful and eminent down a few pegs".¹⁵⁶ This is particularly evident in humiliation, deception and reversal farces, such as Sachs's *The Stolen Bacon* where Heinz Knoll, Kunz Droll and Hans the priest get the better of Hermann Doll. However, this can be taken even further, and as Bermel proposes:

We laugh when a campaigning politico falls off his platform. Or when a warrior trips on his sword. Or when a dowager gets a pie in the eye and custard drips onto her décolletage and diamonds. We equally enjoy watching farce elevate humble servants to outwit their masters.¹⁵⁷

As with carnival, the bodies which inhabit farce, are also "naked" and defenceless. The world of farce is a dangerous one where the playwright (particularly in playwright-driven farce) has control over his/her characters' fate. It is this vulnerability which gives objects so much power. Furthermore, in farce, everyone is equal, and being a king – or a politician in a more modern farce such as Edward Taylor and John Graham's *Pardon Me, Prime Minister* (1979) – provides no more protection than being a slave.

Nevertheless, the element of unreality in farce also mirrors the unreality of the grotesque body. As stated previously, Bakhtin sees the body in grotesque realism as being larger-than-life in order to over-emphasise its base functions. On one level this could reflect the importance farce places on the physical, particularly when one considers that medieval carnival involved the whole of society in its sensual celebrations. However, this can be taken further when one considers Bakhtin's declaration that:

In grotesque realism...the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such it is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretence to renunciation of the earthy, or independence of the earth and the body.¹⁵⁸

The above quote re-emphasises all that has been said so far concerning the “levelling” of medieval society where nothing is considered “sacred” enough to be safe from the influence of carnival. Notwithstanding the important point that this “levelling” is only temporary – and the hierarchical divisions and power struggles reassert themselves following the excess of the carnival – the equalising process makes the private public, and exposes those secrets and societal taboos which are usually kept hidden. Like carnival, farce also confronts and exposes societal taboos. For example, a popular form of the snowball farce is the bedroom farce where, through performance, the bedroom – possibly the most private of spaces – is made “public” to an audience. Those “hidden” activities are “degraded” and made no more “sacred” than any other. This can explain the frequent use of such farcical conventions as attempted adultery, trickery and violence. However, Robert W. Corrigan does raise an important point regarding taboo subjects:

As more liberal sexual attitudes develop, farce has tended to move to other realms...Talking to some of my students about the subject of farce, I discovered that they did not find the bedroom variety very funny. Sex, they said, was increasingly a take it or leave it matter for most of their generation, and they were neither outraged nor titillated by it when it was represented in the theatre. They even went on to admit that they had actually acted out most of their sexual fantasies – at least all of those with even a modicum of taste could ever be presented on the stage. Money, business, bureaucratic power and the system – these, they insisted, were the widely held values of our time and hence more appropriate subject matter for farce.¹⁵⁹

Corrigan’s quote suggests that certain taboo subjects may go out of fashion and become outdated and irrelevant. What his students failed to realise is that in order to accept farce, one must enter into its unreal world and perceive it as real. An audience’s opinion of the taboo is, to a great extent, irrelevant. Rather, one should consider how the characters in the play react to a specific taboo. This “illegal” subject might instigate the chaos, but – as discussed in chapter one – it is ultimately the characters’ fears which

drive the story along. Thus, if a character is shocked by sexuality, it becomes a worthy taboo subject for that particular play.¹⁶⁰

Importantly, it is the contextual basis which will affect interpretation. For example, a hypersensitive individual might find a production of a play by Aristophanes staged as closely as possible to the original to be vulgar, crude and politically incorrect. Equally, the above hypothetical individual could consider medieval carnival – seen as perfectly “normal” by its practitioners – as grotesque. Furthermore, dealing with taboo topics can expose a playwright to criticism from offended individuals or groups who might see themselves as being parodied. Cooney’s *Two Into One* has a number of characters who, although insisting they have nothing against homosexuality, continually insult George, whom they mistakenly believe to be a homosexual. From a comic perspective one would laugh at the character’s comments and be offended by the narrow-minded views they advocate. On the other hand, the characters could be seen as grotesque by a person unable to react to their comments. From a farcical point of view – with laughter directed specifically at the characters – one would be amused by their hypocritical and narrow-minded behaviour. Farce’s aim is humour and enjoyment, but it still treads the grotesque divide because of its fascination with the taboo. And, people unfamiliar with farce’s various characteristics might reject a play like *Two Into One*.

The next chapter will use *Fawlty Towers* as a case study to determine how farcical techniques have been adapted to the television medium. Points raised in chapters one and two – in particular those relating to Commedia and the grotesque – will be re-explored in relation to this television series to demonstrate the lasting influences certain dramatic forms of the past have had on farce.

Chapter 3

From 1969 to 1973, John Cleese co-wrote and performed in the television series *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. Kim “Howard” Johnson, notes that Cleese became “easily bored”, and by the third series was “already tiring of the show”.¹ Cleese states that by the second series he and his collaborators were beginning to repeat themselves, and only one more series was produced after he left in 1973.² He intended to collaborate with his then wife, Connie Booth, and develop “something different”. Cleese went to Jimmy Gilbert, the head of light entertainment at the BBC, to ascertain if he and Booth would be backed. Once given the go-ahead, they had to develop an effective scenario. In the late 1960s, when the “Pythons” were in Torquay to film some location shots, they stayed at the Gleneagles Hotel run by a Mr Sinclair who, according to Cleese, was an exceptionally rude man. Michael Palin (another “Python”) further corroborates this in his diary entry for May 12, which reads: “Our hotel, the Gleneagles, was a little out of Torquay... Mr Sinclair, the proprietor, seemed to view us from the start as a colossal inconvenience”.³ While the others moved to the Imperial, Cleese and Booth remained at the hotel which later became their inspiration for *Fawlty Towers*. Johnson quotes Cleese as follows:

It was based on a hotel I'd stayed at back when I was filming Python – the manager was just wonderfully rude... He was like Basil, but much smaller, a skinny little guy about five-foot four-inches, with a large wife who dominated him. We reversed the sizes.⁴

With these memories, Johnson states it took Cleese and Booth an hour to come up with the idea of setting the series in a hotel.⁵

In spite of the series' fame and its status as a “classic”, it did not have a very promising start. Cleese claims he was told *Fawlty Towers* was not a good idea, as its hotel setting would make it very claustrophobic.⁶ He relates that after having completed

the first script, an unnamed person wrote a memo describing it as “a very boring situation” with “nothing but very clichéd characters and I cannot see anything but a disaster if we go ahead with it”. According to Cleese, this memo now hangs in the office of the current head of light entertainment at the BBC. Furthermore, Cleese quotes the *Daily Mirror* as saying after the second episode, “Long John short on jokes”, while “one of the Edinburgh papers said it was very poor”. It was only towards the end of the first series, and with subsequent repeats, that *Fawlty Towers*’ popularity began to grow. Cleese comments that “if you do something that is original it takes a little time for any kind of momentum to build up”. Nonetheless, both series won the Best Comedy Award at the British Academy Awards and, according to Bright and Ross, *Fawlty Towers* has successfully entered “both the European and US markets”.⁷

Fawlty Towers comprises of two series with the same cast of regulars (Brian Hall joined the cast for series two as Terry the cook):

Basil Fawlty [owner of <i>Fawlty Towers</i>]John Cleese
Sybil Fawlty [Basil’s wife]Prunella Scales
Manuel [the Spanish waiter]Andrew Sachs
Polly [the waitress and odd job woman]Connie Booth
Major Gowen [an elderly resident]Ballard Berkeley
Miss Tibbs [an elderly resident]Gilly Flower
Miss Gatsby [an elderly resident]Renée Roberts ⁸

Series one first screened on September 19, 1975 with *A Touch of Class*. This was followed by *The Builders*, *The Wedding Party*, *The Hotel Inspectors*, *Gourmet Night* and *The Germans*. Series two initially aired on February 19, 1979, the titles being *Communication Problems*, *The Psychiatrist*, *Waldorf Salad*, *The Kipper and the Corpse*, *The Anniversary* and *Basil the Rat*. The authors decided to stop writing *Fawlty Towers* after *Basil the Rat*, as they believed they had exhausted the *Fawlty Towers* setting and it was time to move on. A number of film scenarios were discussed, but these never eventuated.

Farce, *Fawlty Towers*, and the televisual form

Fawlty Towers falls into the televisual tradition known as situation comedy, or sitcom. According to Ian Bernard, sitcom's roots are in the vaudeville, burlesque, stage revues and those musicals which employed sketch comedy.⁹ Each sketch would last around seven to eight minutes with the characters performing broad stereotypes who "waited for the laughs, took pies in the face, did pratfalls, and played directly to the audience".¹⁰ The sketch show transferred to television (*Monty Python's Flying Circus* being one example) and this then developed into shows with a continuous storyline: the sitcom.¹¹ Andy Medhurst highlights the influence of pre-television radio comedy on the modern British sitcom, while stressing that "the situation comedy as a cultural form is in fact an American creation".¹² This is supported by the *Oxford English Dictionary* which defines a sitcom as an American word which describes a "comedy (serial) in which the humour derives largely from the particular connection of characters and circumstance".¹³ The *Macquarie Dictionary* adds that a sitcom portrays ordinary life.¹⁴ And, the *BBC English Dictionary* states: "a sitcom is a television series which shows the same set of characters in each episode, in amusing situations that are similar to everyday life".¹⁵ Medhurst highlights how British sitcoms attempted to move further into social realism by describing *Steptoe and Son* – a sitcom of the 1960s – as having "had 'more depth... realism, more drama' than previous [situation] comedy".¹⁶

However, as has been pointed out in previous chapters, if farce is reliant on situation, and comedy on characterisation, the term "sitcom" could be viewed as an oxymoron. Linda Aronson suggests describing sitcom as "character com" because she considers it "not so much about the comedy of a specific situation as about certain comic characters reacting in their idiosyncratic ways to a situation designed to bring out

what is comic about them”.¹⁷ Although this definition assumes the “fact” that the characters are “comic” – and gives no mention of farce – it does recognise that without a situation, the characters would have nothing within which to react. Once again I invoke Bermel’s multi-dimensional “continents” and suggest that, like farce, situation comedy can also be rich and varied. There are sitcoms which are essentially comical, and others which rely primarily on farce. Popular British television shows like *Yes*, *Minister* and series two, three and four of *Blackadder* are substantially characterised by verbal wit (Sir Humphrey providing it in the former and *Blackadder* in the latter), and should be housed on the comedy “continent”. On the other hand, as will be demonstrated, *Fawlty Towers* is predominantly farcical. Nonetheless, just as farce infringes on *Yes*, *Minister* and *Blackadder*, *Fawlty Towers* also embraces comedy. For example, in *Basil the Rat*, Basil and Terry wittily comment on the state of the kitchen after a visit from Mr Carnegie, the health inspector:

Basil	Terry, this kitchen is filthy.
Terry	Filthy Towers, eh?
Basil	Now, look...
Terry	Look, all kitchens are filthy, Mr Fawlty – in fact the better the kitchen the filthier it is. Have you ever read George Orwell’s experiences at Maxim’s in Paris?
Basil	No, do you have a copy? I’ll read it out in court. ¹⁸

Both characters are drawn as wits, and laughter would be directed at Terry’s pun on the name “Fawlty Towers” and at Basil’s sarcastic response to Terry’s invocation of Orwell.

The large variety of sitcom styles makes it difficult – and contentious – to describe them in terms of content. However, a focus on structure and form can provide a clearer understanding of their workings. For instance, Aronson summarises the sitcom structure as comprising of a “family” unit of four to six regulars and two to three semi-regulars, whom an audience expects to behave in a particular way.¹⁹ Conversely, Barrie

McMahon and Robyn Quin divide sitcoms into those involving a family and those set in a work situation.²⁰ In the former, the episodes are generally about the family – or “insiders” versus the “outsiders” – with the family, through its strength and solidarity, overcoming all difficulties.²¹ The workplace scenario’s strength lies in allowing the “representation of class differences”.²² Aronson’s characterisation is more functional by being broader and not only encapsulates the workplace scenario – where the characters behave as a surrogate “family” – but includes other situations such as groups of friends acting as a “family unit”. (The American sitcoms *Seinfeld* and *Friends* are two examples.) Basil, the main character in *Fawlty Towers*, is invariably at odds not only with the guests, whom he regularly views as a nuisance, but also with his “family” – including spouse and staff. At other times he joins with the staff to overcome either an “external” catastrophe, or a problem within the “family” which must be concealed from the guests.²³

As pointed out in chapter one, Baker divides farce into two main groups: character driven and playwright driven.²⁴ However, as with Bermel’s “continents”, this division is not clear-cut, and one cannot deny the impact of the central character Basil Fawlty, nor the meticulous attention to detail exercised by the two playwrights. In terms of character-driven farce: all episodes centre on Basil, making him – either directly or indirectly – the catalyst for the chaos and confusion. In some episodes Basil instigates a catastrophe, while in others (as Bermel suggests of farce in general) fate turns against him. In his attempt at fixing a problem, the situation inevitably deteriorates further. For example, in *The Anniversary* Basil prepares a surprise party for his wife Sybil, who in the meantime has left the hotel, offended by his apparent thoughtlessness in having forgotten their fifteenth wedding anniversary. Their friends arrive to celebrate and Basil – in the best tradition of farcical protagonists – panics. At

Polly's suggestion, he concocts the story that Sybil is sick in bed. As the episode proceeds, the lies become more and more outrageous and contradictory until he has Polly impersonate Sybil lying sick in bed to convince his friends of his truthfulness. As pointed out by Cleese:

[Basil] does one lie to cover up, and of course as he seems to get caught out in that lie then he has to switch to a slightly different lie and then to a third and then back to the first by which time that doesn't work. And you just get bogged down in worse and worse degrees of lie.... You know if someone told the truth to begin with there wouldn't be a problem. But it multiplies exponentially once you've told the first lie that doesn't work.

Basil's resort to lies highlights the farcical character's one-track mind and obsessive personality. No matter how illogical the route, Basil stubbornly refuses to be swayed from reaching a particular destination or outcome. The obsessive personality cannot be discounted as a minor farcical aspect, because without it there would be no story. If Basil were to tell his friends the truth, they might laugh and then await Sybil's return. However, within a farcical context this would be dull and Basil's fixation with concealing the truth is what moves the plot through the various snowballing crises. In many instances, saving face and not being proven wrong is all that drives the obsessive farcical character. Even with Sybil's re-appearance at the show's conclusion, Basil maintains the charade by pretending she is a fictitious woman mentioned earlier in the episode who – coincidentally – looks exactly like his wife.

Typical of many farcical characters, Basil also resorts to finding scapegoats in order to avoid taking the blame. In *The Wedding Party*, Basil is under the impression that Polly and a number of the guests are behaving "immorally", and instructs them to leave. Sybil informs him that the guests in question are all one family – the Lloyds – (who are friends of Polly's) and orders him to tell them he made a mistake. Basil is not happy and after rushing upstairs repeating to himself, "I'm sorry I made a mistake" over and over again, he says to them:

I'm sorry ... I'm so sorry, but my wife has made a mistake, I don't know how she did it, but she did, she's made a complete pudding of the whole thing as usual, it'll be perfectly all right for you to stay, I've sorted it all out, I'm frightfully sorry but you know what women are like, they've only got one brain between the lot of them, well not all of them but some of them have, particularly my wife, so please do stay and see you later on, thank you so much.²⁵

By using Sybil as a scapegoat, Basil shows himself to be both selfish and vindictive. He goes even further in *The Kipper and the Corpse*, where he demonstrates his manic instinct for self-preservation and apparent total disregard for other human beings. When he realises that a guest, Mr Leeman, has died during the night from natural causes (rather than being poisoned by the kippers brought up on his breakfast tray), Basil begins to jump about in ecstasy saying: "Oh joy!! Oh, thank you God! Isn't it wonderful!!! Oh, I'm so happy! Hooray!"²⁶ However, his moments of utter cruelty and selfishness occur specifically at the height of panic when he is backed into a corner and, most importantly, cannot find a safe way of extricating himself from his predicament. Instincts of self-preservation take effect and in desperation, Basil becomes the archetypal amoral – not immoral – farcical character. Furthermore, Basil is not as abhorrent a person as might first appear. He does have friends in *The Anniversary* who understand his quirky personality. In *Gourmet Night* he shows restraint when he curbs his impatience with his friend Andre, and he has an ally in Polly who always comes to his rescue in times of crisis. More specifically, in *The Wedding Party* he endeavours to shield Mrs Lloyd from her seemingly adulterous husband, and in *Basil the Rat* he attempts – albeit unsuccessfully – to cheer up Manuel. It could be argued that there is an ulterior motive behind any of the above instances, and, Cleeve describes Basil as a "terrible man" because of his usual malevolent behaviour. Nevertheless, as Cleeve suggests, his ability to generate laughter could endear him to an audience, and he is, to a certain extent, redeemed of his faults.

A further character-driven farcical aspect integral to *Fawlty Towers* involves misunderstandings. Cleese admits to a fascination with people endeavouring to communicate without succeeding. In *Fawlty Towers*, misunderstandings often occur when the characters, as Cleese puts it, “are not using the right words” and become confused. The fire drill sequence in *The Germans* has the guests bewildered by Basil’s attempts at explaining that the ringing sound is the burglar alarm set off accidentally, and not the fire bell. The scene is all the more farcical because of Basil’s impatience and conviction that he is being perfectly clear, even stating in frustration, “I don’t know why we bother, we should let you all burn”.²⁷ This reconnects with Basil’s inability to admit being wrong, while his arrogance prevents him from pausing to consider that his communication skills may be at fault.

Another crucial aspect providing a very character-driven “feel”, is Cleese’s extraordinary physicality. Each episode is imbued with his frenetic energy, emphasising his prominence as a farceur. His whole physical make-up is farcical: a tall, lanky figure “stalking” its way through the hotel. There is nothing intrinsically humorous about being tall, but Basil’s height is so disproportionate to the rest of the characters he stands out as “different”. When coupled with Andrew Sachs (who is much shorter than him) playing the Spanish waiter Manuel, they form a grotesque Laurel and Hardy duo, with Manuel bearing the brunt of Basil’s aggression, acting both as a scapegoat and a punching bag. As Manuel says to Basil in *Basil the Rat*: “Don’t hit me. Always you hit me”.²⁸ Basil’s height is used to full advantage later in the same episode when a guest says to him: “You know something! You’re getting my gander up, you grotty little man. You’re asking for a bunch of fives”.²⁹ This produces a visual gag, as the guest is considerably shorter than Basil, giving the impression of a dwarf threatening to attack a giant.

As Basil runs manically from one end of the hotel to the other, he seems to be “all legs”, as they flare out in every direction. Sybil describes him as “an aging brilliantined stick insect”³⁰ in *The Psychiatrist*. It is impossible to adequately describe his actions, as the visual element is vital in gaining a clear perception of his characterisation. For example, on paper, Basil’s parody of Adolf Hitler in *The Germans*, appears quite clinical:

Basil

Shut up! Here, watch – who’s this, then?

He places his finger across his upper lip and does his Führer party piece. His audience is stunned.

I’ll do the funny walk...

*He performs an exaggerated goose-step out into the lobby, does an about-turn and marches back into the dining room. Both German women are by now in tears, and both men are on their feet.*³¹

On screen, Basil’s legs rise to extraordinary heights as he goose-steps across the room, and then one leg grotesquely wraps “itself” around his body as he turns sharply. His extremely long legs come to “life”, rather like those inanimate objects described in chapter one which are “out to get” the characters. The legs appear like snakes, ready to coil themselves around his body. From a practical standpoint, Cleeve stresses how much energy is required to perform farce: for series two he ran to get fit, describing “physical comedy” (that is, farce) as exhausting. Furthermore, its emphasis on the physical – and its breakneck execution – necessitates a degree of risk taking. Cleeve likens it to football, saying that if you perform farce, you will get hurt. *Fawlty Towers* had Cleeve “snagging [his] finger on door handles and tripping on the little brass strip at the bottom” of the stairs and stubbing his toe. In *The Germans*, Sachs’ jacket was treated with an acid in order for it to smoke and create the illusion of being set on fire. Some of the acid went through the jacket and burnt his skin. In *The Wedding Party*, Basil hits Manuel with a frying pan. However, when Cleeve went to “hit Andrew a sort of sliding blow ... he straightened up” and Sachs had a headache for two days. Unlike

the characters, the actors are not indestructible. The heightened speed, coupled with the myriad of different incidents all taking place at once, makes farce quite dangerous for an actor. A farceur can be likened to a tightrope walker with no net, balancing on a rope while juggling three balls: one mistake could lead to disaster.

Nonetheless, of equal importance to the characters are the playwrights, and Cleeze attributes the series' superiority to the high quality of the scripts. He states that the average BBC show has roughly sixty-five pages of script, whereas every *Fawlty Towers* episode had between 135 and 140 pages. Each page is dense with material, making the plots both rich and varied. As Harold Snoad says, a good comedy (and, I would argue, farce) "spring[s] from a good script".³² Morris Bright and Robert Ross claim:

Many of the basic ingredients of *Fawlty Towers*, such as lots of people running about shouting and screaming, often falling down, and throwing or spilling things on each other, are essential slapstick, but the wit of the writing, and the intricacy of the plotting make it actually pure farce *Fawlty Towers* was planned so as to make such slapstick-type moments merely part of a tightly plotted, intense and emotional performance.³³

In other words, all the various farcical techniques are brought into play to produce each detailed and polished episode. Cleeze relates that he and Booth never wrote any of the scripts alone, yet initially he would write most of Basil and Manuel's lines and she wrote the majority of Sybil and Polly's dialogue. When Cleeze would suggest a line for Sybil, Booth would often point out that a woman would not say what Cleeze had proposed. However, "gradually she started to write more of Basil, and [Cleeze] started to write more of Sybil. And then [they] ... co-operated more and more on the characters".

Plot was all-important to Cleeze and Booth, an aspect essential to farce because of its emphasis on situation. According to Cleeze, they would sometimes spend as

much as two-and-a-half weeks on a plot – alternating between the various episodes if they were having difficulties on a particular script – and would only write the dialogue once the plot was fully developed. Cleese states that if one starts writing the dialogue first, “the chances of ... getting to a satisfactory ending are one in a hundred”. The dialogue must have the foundation of a good plot if it is to flow naturally and not slow down the action. Without a firm contextual basis, dialogue might seem out of place and prevent the action from developing. Like stage farce, each script went through many re-writings.³⁴ In terms of script construction, Cleese points out that each episode has one key idea together with one or two sub-plots running alongside, with the best episodes having them “become intertwined by the end, the last five minutes”. In line with the basic farce plot structure (which is very similar to that of classical tragedy), a *Fawlty Towers* episode goes through five basic stages: stability, disruption, escalation, chaos, culmination and resolution. All of the episodes of the series (as with farce in general) begin in relative calm. At first glance, the directions at the beginning of *Waldorf Salad* may seem an exception to the rule:

*The hotel dining room. It is towards the end of dinner-time. The room is very full and Basil, Polly and Manuel are bustling about frantically. Sybil, however, is standing by a central table, ignoring the confusion. She is talking to Mr Libson, who is sitting by himself at the table. He looks extremely bored.*³⁵

However, this is the normal hustle and bustle involved in the running of a hotel during meal times. The stability is then disrupted by the arrival of Mr and Mrs Hamilton who wish to be served dinner after the kitchen has closed for the evening. Problems escalate as Basil dismisses Terry, deciding to cook the meal himself. Chaos envelops the hotel when Basil loses control of the situation through his inability to prepare the meals ordered by the Hamiltons. This is compounded though his attempt at fixing nonexistent problems while pretending that it is Terry who is doing the cooking. The episode culminates with Mr Hamilton discovering Basil’s charade and all the other guests

informing him (Basil) of his inadequacies as a hotel manager. At length, there is resolution with Sybil's arrival and Basil deciding to leave and then return as a guest.

Such chaos requires the aid of many farcical techniques and one used continually by the authors involves situational misunderstandings – such as the episode outlined earlier with Basil and Mrs Lloyd in *The Wedding Party* – where a character arrives at the wrong conclusions after witnessing an event.³⁶ Playwright-driven farces generally contain a fate-doomed character who, as stated by Bermel, finds him/herself affected by the most amazing (and terrible) coincidences.³⁷ Irony is often at play. Again, in *The Wedding Party*, it is ironic that through a series of misunderstandings the Lloyds believe Basil is as immoral as he considers them to be. At the end of the episode Basil is in his underwear undressing for bed, and Sybil sends him downstairs to catch a suspected burglar after hearing suspicious noises. Basil clouts the burglar – actually Manuel, with a hangover – on the head with a frying pan and, before realising his mistake, sits astride him to prevent any escape. Coincidentally – as with so many Feydeau, Cooney and Pertwee farces – the Lloyds arrive and are scandalised by what they see. Cleeve likens himself and Booth to “gods [who are] playing with this man's [Basil's] life”. However, the coincidences in *Fawlty Towers* are not as remarkable as those found in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century farces. For instance, Cleeve relates how he and Booth had hoped to establish that Mr Leeman, the deceased guest in *The Kipper and the Corpse*, would, unbeknownst to Basil, have a twin brother who would make an appearance at the end of the episode and be reprimanded by Basil for pretending to be dead. However, Cleeve claims that it would not have worked on television as “there was no way of Basil telling the twin that his brother was dead” after having scolded him. Once Basil had discovered the truth, “it would have been too difficult mixing that kind of emotion” in so short a period of time. Television's strong

realistic tradition would also make it difficult for an audience to accept such a coincidental occurrence without a detailed explanation.

Televised farce is, necessarily, different from live performance. The spirit of farce does not change, but its techniques must be adapted to fit within the paradigm of television. For example, once recorded, the sitcom – or any other televisual programme – remains static. It is the visual equivalent of a play in print form. There will always be new ways of interpreting an episode or a scene – contexts, viewers and so forth will constantly vary – but unless scenes are re-recorded and inserted into the performance text, the visual images do not change. A further characteristic of the sitcom is that if it proves popular it can be viewed as the “authoritative” version, and any reproductions – either on film or in a theatre – will be met with comparisons to the “original”. As pointed out by Bermel, no two actors perform a scene in exactly the same way,³⁸ and any attempts to re-create Basil with another actor might seem “incorrect”. Every time a Michael Pertwee farce is produced on stage it is met by a new generation of theatregoers, with each director and cast attempting to create a fresh “new” production. Brian Rix may have played the first Roger Fogg in Pertwee’s *A Bit Between the Teeth* (1976), but he is not Fogg. On the other hand, it can be argued that Cleeve is Basil Fawlty because his incarnation of the character has been recorded, and thus endures as the “definitive” version. In America, there have been two attempts at re-making *Fawlty Towers* but, according to Bright and Ross, these did not succeed.³⁹ Indeed, any subsequent series – whatever the standard in comparison to the Cleeve/Booth creation – would always be compared to the “original”. Comparisons can also be made between one series of a particular sitcom and another. Cleeve states that both he and Booth were reluctant to write the second series because of the unreal expectations of the viewing public. He says that the first series was remembered as being “better than it was”

because three or four really good scenes were construed to be the “general standard, rather than the highlights and [the audience] expect the second series to be at the highlight level all the way through”.⁴⁰ Given these expectations, it is not surprising the second series was produced four years after the first, with the authors working much harder on it than on series one.

A further aspect – associated with audience response – is that while sitcoms are filmed to be screened on television, a studio audience is often present at the recording to motivate the actors to perform energetically and supply the laughter track. Snoad states that there can be up to three hundred people in a studio audience,⁴¹ who require a comedian to “warm them up” before the show and keep them “warm” during any pauses in filming.⁴² The importance of the studio audience becomes clear in Cleese’s anecdotal story on *The Builders*: the show was performed to almost complete silence although Cleese had been assured of its humour. Later, it was discovered the BBC had invited seventy people from the Icelandic Broadcasting Corporation – none of whom could speak English – to sit in on the filming. For Cleese, performing in silence was not a very comfortable experience, making the recording “pretty tough”. As Snoad points out, “[situation] comedy is judged by just one simple criteria – is it funny?”⁴³ Therefore, any absence of laughter would imply a lack of quality. Although generally frowned upon at the time by the BBC, some “canned”, or pre-recorded, laughter was added later to embellish that particular episode.⁴⁴ Canned laughter would also be added when the audience, engrossed in the live action, would not react promptly to a pre-recorded exterior shot screened on the monitors, or vice-versa. One could argue for the necessity of a laughter track, as the sitcom is generally the only filmic form which contains recorded laughter. Cleese suggests the laughter track will spur the home audience – which generally consists of only one or two people – to laugh more

energetically by creating the illusion of having a house filled with laughing people, as would a packed theatre. However, as pointed out by Bermel, canned laughter does pose a problem: viewers can be annoyed by laughter which sounds amazingly generous and “groan, when they would otherwise have maintained a forgiving silence”.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, I would argue that by using “live” laughter, Bermel’s perceived “problem” could be somewhat alleviated. Unembellished studio laughter sounds more “natural” than canned laughter by being more genuine as it would relate specifically to a particular scene. If an audience finds a sitcom humorous then there is a valid possibility that the home audience will find it humorous too, and with a little “help”, laugh more liberally than they would have done without the laughter track.

However, laughter can instigate other problems: for example, actors on stage who continue delivering lines during raucous laughter will not be heard. A line may require repeating once the laughter subsides in order to ensure understanding. Camera pace – entirely different to stage pace – will dictate the insertion of laughter pauses. For instance, Cleese made it very clear that *Fawlty Towers* was being recorded for the home audience and, notwithstanding the laughter track, those few people sitting at home would never laugh as much, or as loudly, as the studio audience. Therefore, the pace had to be much faster as the laughter pauses required by a home audience would be much shorter. Jack Lemmon foreshadows Cleese’s decision by describing a scene in the movie *Mr. Roberts* (1955) which was filmed in three ways: first at a fast pace with no laughter pauses, and then at two much slower speeds to give the audience laughter periods. According to Lemmon, “the last two versions bombed in previews and we went back to the legitimate one. The audience may have missed some lines, but it worked”.⁴⁶ Pauses for expected laughter seemed inordinately long and slowed down the action. With *Fawlty Towers*, the studio audience was deliberately set aside in favour of

the home audience, as the microphones would pick up those lines or jokes missed by the studio audience. Laughter continuing from previous jokes creates the illusion that the audience is laughing at both.

Another aspect which deserves consideration is the set design. As pointed out by Medhurst, the sitcom is generally characterised by a centralised social realist mode in “a definite and unchanging setting”⁴⁷ – and *Fawlty Towers* is no exception. However, compared to more recent British sitcoms like *Keeping Up Appearances* and *One Foot in the Grave*, the *Fawlty Towers* set does have a more “theatrical” feeling. The aforementioned sitcoms have much better constructed sets, giving the illusion of having been filmed in an actual house. In contrast, the *Fawlty Towers* set – particularly the “upstairs” section – can appear quite flimsy. For example, when Basil runs upstairs, the “walls” and hand rails tend to wobble, and in *The Builders* when Basil grabs Manuel and hits his head against the newly-built wall, it starts to shake, thereby destroying the illusion of it being constructed of brick. In addition, although it was improved in the second series, the “outdoor scenery” at the hotel entrance is not very realistic. Whenever characters enter or exit, they go round a corner rather than use the stairs leading up to the hotel entrance as revealed in the outdoor shots. Nevertheless, this does not make *Fawlty Towers* unbelievable. Rather, it connects it more strongly with the theatrical representations of farce in the plays of Feydeau, Cooney and other farceurs. Moreover, the “theatrical” feeling is not limited to a shaky set: the presence of the studio audience results in a set constructed along the same lines as a proscenium arch stage. There is an invisible “fourth wall”, and although the actors do not always direct their performances towards the studio audience, there are no shots filmed from the lobby entrance or from the kitchen door looking inwards. Nevertheless, while Bermel criticises some early “living room” sitcoms as having the appearance of filmed plays,⁴⁸

more sophisticated techniques have been developed to alleviate this problem. Snoch highlights the use of swingers and traps when shooting studio scenes in modern sitcoms.⁴⁹ A swinger is a section of the set “wall” which has been hinged in order that it may swing up or to the side and enable a camera to film an actor from a different angle. A trap is usually an open door or window not appearing in a particular scene through which a camera may record the action. If positioned correctly, an actor can give the illusion of facing “upstage” without giving away the existence, and position, of the audience.

A camera also permits a sitcom to do what is impossible on the naturalistic stage: “literally” move to a distant location such as a field or a city street. According to Gary Berman, “British” sitcoms tend to include scenes shot on location, whereas “American sitcoms rarely venture outdoors, usually opting to simulate a location on an indoor set”.⁵⁰ He states that location shots permit “almost infinite storyline possibilities”,⁵¹ and may, to a certain extent, explain why some BBC executives felt that a hotel setting was claustrophobic. *Gourmet Night* uses more location shots than any other episode, permitting the following scene:

Basil meanwhile has turned into a narrow road. It is blocked by a parked van. He curses, sounds his horn, waits, gives up, reverses back and stalls. He tries to start the car again. This time it refuses completely. He becomes more frantic.

Basil Come on, start, will you!? Start, you vicious bastard!! Come on! Oh my God! I’m warning you – if you don’t start...(screams with rage) I’ll count to three. (he presses the starter, without success) One...two...three...!! Right! That’s it! (he jumps out of the car and addresses it) You’ve tried it on just once too often! Right! Well, don’t say I haven’t warned you! I’ve laid it on the line to you time and time again! Right! Well...this is it! I’m going to give you a damn good thrashing! (he rushes off and comes back with a large branch; he beats the car without mercy)⁵²

This scene is significant because it combines farcical techniques of both an artistic and technical nature. First, there is the seeming impossibility of such a large man being able to fit in so small a car. Nevertheless, like a rabbit being pulled out of hat, Basil’s body

miraculously materialises intact from the vehicle. His emergence acts like a sudden appearance from behind a closed door, or reflects the cartoon technique of characters being able to hide behind unbelievably thin tree trunks. Next, the second “actor” in the scene – the automobile – behaves in a typically farcical manner by breaking down the moment the protagonist desperately requires it to work. However, events are not entirely fate driven, as earlier in the episode Basil had endeavoured to fix the car himself rather than follow Sybil’s advice and have it repaired by a mechanic. After having witnessed his descent into frantic irrationality, Basil’s apparent nervous breakdown is fully justified by the farcical “world”. As the car is the only scapegoat available, the car beating is for Basil – and for the audience which has been with him all the way – the only “logical” thing to do.

From a technical point of view, a farcical sequence may make sense on paper but not work in practice. Or, as discussed with reference to *The Germans*, be dull on paper and hilarious in performance. A scene may require fine-tuning during rehearsal which cannot be carried out in the abstract. Snoad describes television as a practical medium⁵³ and Cleese states that, “the interesting thing about the beating the car sequence is how technical it is”. During rehearsal, Cleese first hit the car with a rigid branch and then with a flaccid one, but apparently neither was very humorous. Only by using a branch with the right degree of flexibility did the scene produce the desired effect. Next, Cleese claims that when the car first breaks down the scene is made more amusing by having his voice coming from within the car as if it were “a goldfish bowl [rather] than... at full volume”. Cleese says: “often you don’t know why these things are the case, and you just have to stumble around trying things until you discover what works”. One could argue many reasons; perhaps the lines are made more immediate, providing the impression of Basil being “trapped” in the catastrophe. Or, maybe there is

an element of suspense as an audience is left guessing as to what Basil will do as his anger builds in that confined space. Whatever the reason, this once again demonstrates the importance of fine-tuning the performance in farce.

A further aspect pertinent to camera use is a character's ability to move off screen during a shot. When Basil leaves the car to get the branch, the camera remains on the car; Basil's disappearance coupled with the slight pause sets up the expectation that something important (that is, humorous) is about to occur. If Basil had been filmed finding the branch the element of surprise would have been lost. The audience – having heard Basil's final statement and being familiar with his personality – might have a rough idea as to what he is about to do, but his sudden reappearance still acts as a humorous surprise. As suggested by Bermel, the world of farce is rife with unexpected entrances and exits, and instead of leaving a room, as he would have to do on stage, Basil exits the shot. This opens up many more occasions for humour than would a stage farce because of the greater degree of farcical possibilities.

Close-ups are another luxury unavailable in the theatre. An audience member's attention may be distracted from a stage farce's main storyline, but the close-up compels the home audience to focus only on one person, object or action. Furthermore, facial expressions can be seen clearly and used to advantage. In *Basil the Rat*, as Mr Carnegie lists the copious hygiene problems of the hotel kitchen, the camera cuts from one character's face to another. There is nothing inherently amusing about Carnegie's list, but his recitation, juxtaposed with the camera close-ups, makes the scene farcical. Both Polly and Sybil have expressions of embarrassment and shame, whereas Basil has a look of slight shock. As always, Basil attempts to talk his way out of the problem, but he is no match for Carnegie. This is farce at its subtlest: there is almost no physical

movement and even Basil's interruptions are used only as a counterpoint to Carnegie. As the camera moves from face to face with each of Carnegie's accusations, it seems to point a finger of blame on a specific character. With the words "food handling routine suspect", the focus is on Polly, and when he says, "evidence of smoking in food preparation area", there is a close-up of Sybil's face.⁵⁴ Humour arises from association with past events: in previous episodes, Polly has been seen preparing the food and Sybil is the only smoker amongst the main characters.⁵⁵ Here Polly and Sybil – who, unlike Basil and Manuel tend to be comedians rather than farceurs – enter the realm of farce. Quick, efficient Polly (except when Basil interferes) and calm, sensible Sybil are now laughed at. The scene suggests that not even they are perfect. Sybil, normally the strong authoritarian character who counterbalances Basil's neurotic, irrational behaviour, comes off second best. As discussed in chapter two, the "large" figures of society are those which cause the greatest humour when they fail. Colloquially, "the bigger they are, the harder they fall", and Sybil, the "responsible" character of the series, has very far to "fall".⁵⁶ The humour increases each time the camera centres on her by emphasising and re-emphasising her inadequacies and embarrassment.

While cameras can be useful in allowing scene flexibility and more subtle performances, they can also be problematic. Two characteristics include the more "realistic" acting tradition, and – particularly with close-ups – a restricted performance space. As pointed out in chapter one, the notion of "realism" is debatable; what is "real" to one person may not be "real" to another. However, the attempt at a realistic hotel setting does push *Fawlty Towers* towards realism. Furthermore, as pointed out by Barry Curtis, the intimate, self-contained screen "space" eliminates the need to project one's voice and actions to the back of an auditorium. This develops a "more relaxed 'realistic' mode of interaction between characters with a particular stress on the

‘reaction’ shot”.⁵⁷ Curtis’ focus on reaction is fully justified. The emphasis on situation highlights the importance of characters adapting quickly to each new – and difficult – circumstance. On screen, overacting – or over-reacting – is much more obvious because of the closeness of the camera. Should the performers attempt more “controlled” performances, these could be interpreted as being more “real”. Nevertheless, as farce embraces the unreal, boundaries can be pushed even within the context of televisual farce. For example, when Basil returns to his hotel in *The Builders* and discovers the wrong door has been blocked-up, his manic reaction could be interpreted as over-the-top. However, once familiar with Basil’s personality and his mortal fear of Sybil, his antics become fully warranted. As he later informs O’Reilly the builder – Sybil “can kill a man at ten paces with one blow of her tongue”.⁵⁸ In other words, an exaggerated performance is justified if the “given circumstances” are considered “real”.

As indicated by Robert Benedetti, “movements [on film] are expressed not in feet but in inches!”⁵⁹ A mark may be placed on the floor where an actor should stand, and he/she must reach it without looking down. If the mark is missed, the camera will not pick up the actor properly. Even eye movements, which on stage might be fairly insignificant, must be precise as an inconsistent eye line can prevent a “good take” to be included in the final product.⁶⁰ Farce’s energy and fast action makes performing for the camera doubly difficult because of the limited acting space. This is further compounded by the short rehearsal period of a televised sitcom. With the exception of *The Anniversary*, all the episodes had only five days of rehearsal. Cleese recalls that,

The first day would be the read-through and you’d start putting it on its feet. You’d start figuring, “all right, well, Sybil’s there so I’m at the desk”. The second day you’d finish putting it on its feet. So you’d only have three days to rehearse it...Then by the third day little bits of it were beginning to work because people [were] getting to know their lines. But then you came to the fourth and fifth days – usually there was the weekend in the middle which helped because you could spend the whole weekend learning – but on the fourth and fifth days you were

absolutely flat out because there was a great deal to learn. Not just the words, but all the business. You had to figure out exactly what the business is and then remember it and practice it so that it's really quick.

A stage production would ideally have more time set aside which would enable the actors to cope with the high speed of the physical business and ensure a polished performance. Particularly with long runs, early performances could be used to gauge the audience response and any necessary script or acting changes could be made to improve the production. Furthermore, as Bernard says, “a good comic [or farcical] actor learns from each performance and enhances the part, finding laughs where there were none before”.⁶¹ Nevertheless, an aspect vital in performing both stage and screen farce is teamwork. Cleeve stresses how the cast worked happily as a team, with nobody attempting to “build up their part” to the detriment of others. There was much co-operation between the principal characters, and if Cleeve were rehearsing a scene with Scales, then Booth and Sachs would watch and offer advice. Actors not only influence each other, but also impact on the performance as a whole. Referring to the sitcom, Malcolm Taylor comments that it is impossible to pre-plan a shot list until after “a couple of rehearsals because so much creativity comes from the actors’ invention”.⁶² Furthermore, the characters’ idiosyncrasies will never become evident without the conflict between characters developed in rehearsal. Aronson states that conflict drives every sitcom episode, *both* personality conflicts between characters and conflict within the storyline.⁶³ Nonetheless, for Cleeve there was never an adequate length of time to get the episodes well enough rehearsed. The entire show would be recorded between eight and ten o’clock in the evening after a full – and tiring – day of rehearsal.⁶⁴

However, television does have a technique which allows it to improve the pace: editing. Cleeve reveals that between twenty and twenty-five hours were spent editing each show. The editor would “tighten it there, and take out a line of dialogue there, and

sometimes take out a repetition there and lose two lines of dialogue there” to give it the pace and energy of a well-performed stage farce. Snoch highlights the danger of having long scenes with no dialogue such as “lengthy and complicated developing shots to establish a location” as “a thirty-five second tracking shot can go on forever and can have the effect of stopping the show stone dead”.⁶⁵ Furthermore, thirty-five seconds of silence might mean cutting thirty-five seconds of dialogue. *Fawlty Towers* eliminates this problem through its tight editing and having practically every scene filled with dialogue and/or action. According to Cleeve, the average sitcom has two hundred camera cuts, whereas *Fawlty Towers* has four hundred per show, thus keeping the pace brisk. *The Anniversary* is the only episode which moves more into the realm of comedy, but that was intentional as Cleeve claims he and Booth were attempting to emulate Alan Ayckbourn’s style which is generally less farcical and relies mainly on wit. In *The Anniversary* silences are used for comic effect (for instance, the characters stand around in embarrassed silence while they wait for “Sybil” to get ready for her to see them) and these remain brief.

***Fawlty Towers*, Commedia, and the Grotesque**

Fawlty Towers was not created in a vacuum, but was influenced by what came before it. While it is important to acknowledge the impact of more modern farceurs such as Feydeau (particularly in relation to plot construction and recurring farcical themes) and the post-1950s British writers (Cooney, Pertwee, Orton, *et al*), and how the situation comedy structure shaped the series, I shall now move the focus to Commedia and the grotesque aspects of medieval carnival outlined in chapter two. It will become clear that their characteristics act as farcical catalysts and have influenced both twentieth-century farce and *Fawlty Towers*.

Commedia is evident in the well rehearsed routines which might, at first glance, seem slightly detached from the storyline and, like the *lazzi*, exist for their own sake. At the conclusion of *The Hotel Inspectors*, the actual hotel inspectors arrive just as Basil is “punishing” a difficult guest (Mr Hutchinson), whom he had previously believed to be a hotel inspector:

He [Basil] disappears into the kitchen. Walt leaves by the main doors. Three men walk into the hotel past him; they are the inspectors.

1st inspector Twenty-six rooms, twelve with private bathrooms.
2nd inspector Yes, well, why don't you have dinner here, and Chris and I can try the Claremont.
3rd inspector OK. The owner's one Basil Fawlty.

They ring the bell. At that moment Hutchinson comes downstairs. Manuel scampers up to him.

Manuel Please, please! Mr Fawlty wants to say *adios*.

Basil strides out of the kitchen and firmly places a large squidgy pie in Hutchinson's crotch and another in his face.

Basil Manuel, the cream.

He opens Hutchinson's briefcase and Manuel pours a pint of best quality cream into it. The Major comes up.

The Major Papers arrived yet, Fawlty?

Basil Not yet, Major, no, sorry.

The Major wanders off. Basil shakes the briefcase thoroughly and tucks it under Hutchinson's arm.

Basil Now go away. If you ever come back I shall kill you.

He propels the stunned Hutchinson out of the main door, turns expansively and kisses Manuel on the forehead. He then strides triumphantly to the counter and beams at the new arrivals.

Basil Good afternoon, and what can I do for you three gentlemen? (*a pause; then the terrible truth dawns*) Aaaagh!!!⁶⁶

In this scene Cleese and Booth resorted to a very old farcical technique: the pie-in-the-face gag. This is followed by the more “original” pie in the groin, and finally cream being poured into Hutchinson's briefcase. However, despite such scenes, in *Fawlty Towers* there are no actual *lazzi* moments – in the traditional sense – where the action stops for the gag. Rather, the *Fawlty Towers* *lazzi* are better associated with the *burle*,

which although routine-like, are very much a part of the story. In the above extract, as Basil carries out his vindictive assault on Hutchinson, he is able to hold a regular conversation with the Major. The day-to-day business of the hotel does not stop while Basil exacts his revenge upon his victim. Furthermore, Basil's actions are not haphazard, but result from Hutchinson's physical assault on him earlier. And, it is ironic that after all his fawning over "fake" inspectors, Basil should embarrass himself in front of the real ones. By being oblivious to the presence of the hotel inspectors, the scene enhances suspense in the audience which is left wondering how Basil will react to their being there. Strengthened by the illusion of having being victorious over a guest, Basil jauntily returns to his place behind the desk, and then swings from one emotional extreme to another. The scream is particularly effective. It is loud and breaks the tension, allowing the audience to laugh at his error.

Dramatic "types" – a mainstay of Commedia – are also present in *Fawlty Towers*.⁶⁷ It is important to remember that these were not just stereotypes, but carefully drawn creations crafted and shaped into individuals by the actors, adding their own "touch" to each incarnation. In so doing, apparently stereotypical characters were made three-dimensional. In *Fawlty Towers*, the four principal characters and many of the "guest stars" are "types". As Commedia characters gained their own specific nuances through years of performance, so the regulars in *Fawlty Towers* underwent changes over the course of the two series. A straightforward example is Manuel's skill with the English language: in the first episode he can hardly speak a word of English, but by the final episode he is considerably more fluent. Particular character traits, such as Sybil's laugh – which reminds Basil of "somebody machine-gunning a seal"⁶⁸ – were developed in rehearsal. Clearly, *Fawlty Towers* did not have hundreds of years to change and improve like Commedia, thus the changes had to come about faster. As the actors

became more comfortable with their creations, they fine-tuned their characters' personalities and behaviour. This results in an audience becoming more familiar with the characters, possibly discovering how to predict certain situations. Decisions made early in a series can also have a bearing on the rest of the series, affecting how the characters behave and which situations are possible. According to Cleeve, the pilot episode was experimental in that the characters were not yet fully developed. For example, when Scales first read through her part, she did it differently to how Sybil had been envisioned by Cleeve and Booth. After two days' rehearsal they considered Scales' interpretation to be an improvement on their original conception. Later episodes were written with her in mind. (According to Iain Johnstone the part of Sybil Fawlty was originally offered to Bridget Turner who turned it down because she did not find the scripts amusing.⁶⁹) Additionally, Polly was originally a philosophy student, but this aspect of her character was considered ineffective. Four or five minutes of the pilot were re-recorded before being released to the general public in order to portray her as an art student. In later episodes her art student role is used as the basis for a number of humorous situations. Philosophical jokes may have been a little too esoteric: having her attempt a sketch of Basil while he is having a nervous breakdown in *The Builders* is more in the realm of farce – in terms of its incongruity – than if she were to interrupt the scene to philosophise on the action.

Another important Commedia characteristic evident in *Fawlty Towers* is the use of masks. The characters in the series all wear their own “masks” which – through costume, appearance, and facial and physical mannerisms – assist in defining who they are and act as signifiers of their personalities and behaviours. As stated by Cleeve, costuming is of vital importance because of its ability to convey character information. Basil's slightly too-small clothes emphasise his size and lankiness and the very smart

“old school” (often tweed) attire acts as a counterbalance to his frenetic activity. His clothing becomes an ironic mockery of his (unsuccessful) determination to remain “respectable” at all times while the world explodes in chaos around him. Basil is a poseur unable to control his environment, and his too-small clothes reflect his inability to “fit in” properly with the world he inhabits as they become more and more dishevelled as the episode progresses. And, like *Pantalone*, he is often characterised by an overarching flaw – haughtiness in *A Touch of Class*, miserliness in *The Builders*, and prudishness in *The Wedding Party* are three examples – which makes him single-minded in his pursuits and often a catalyst for the chaos which he creates and then envelops him.

Sybil has her strait-laced, no-nonsense (though fairly tight) outfits, frilly blouses and extravagant hairdo to set her up as the hotel matriarch. She further “creates” herself by wearing wigs. One is left to ponder why she would do so, and what the wig may be concealing. However, she does not attempt to hide her wigs from the guests, and in *Communication Problems* Sybil is “on the phone at the reception desk ... [and] is discussing a wig on a plastic display head”.⁷⁰ As an hotelier should mask all emotions to produce the cheerful veneer of good hotel management, by slightly altering her appearance Sybil’s wig symbolises her ability to fulfil the role of a person skilled in the nuances of the hospitality industry without completely covering up her “actual” personality. While Sybil succeeds to a much greater degree than Basil, there are moments when her mask slips. For example, in *Warldorf Salad* she tediously talks to a guest while the other members of staff run around trying to serve the other guests their dinner. And, in *The Psychiatrist* she, like Basil, flirts with a guest.

Polly often wears her blue and white “maid’s outfit”. She is set up as a jack-of-all-trades who must cope with all the difficult demands of her employer. After Basil threatens to ruin her job prospects in *The Anniversary* she says,

Waitress? That’s a joke. I help out at reception, I clean the rooms, I deal with the tradesmen, I change the fuses, I mend the switchboard, and if you think my duties now include impersonating members of your family you have got one more screw loose than I thought.⁷¹

Like *Colombina*, Polly is an extremely flexible character, and her mask is the most consistent because of her function as Basil’s supporting role.

Finally, Manuel’s waiter’s uniform and large moustache work together to create the unique Manuel “look”, a mask as recognisable as *Arlecchino*’s chequered outfit. The extent to which the mask “created” Manuel is emphasised by Cleeve’s account of Sachs discovering his role:

He’s so quiet; he’s [an] immensely thoughtful, extraordinarily kind man. Very considerate, and rather quiet, almost introverted. And then he put that moustache on him, and it was “ding”, and this energy explodes, something just comes through that you don’t normally see.

As discussed previously, a mask defines a role. And, in this case, there is the implication that like Keith Johnstone’s example in chapter two, Sachs is “possessed” by his character. Manuel’s actions and mannerisms will always be associated with that role. This is especially apt when considering Commedia and sitcom, as their strong visual tradition suggests the audience’s memory will often be connected to the characters’ appearance.

However, masks can be problematic because of their relationship to the grotesque.⁷² Commedia and Ancient Greek comedy masks were grotesque in that they combined the humorous with the gruesome by exaggerating facial features such as the nose, and hair. By wearing the masks the actor’s face and, by association, the rest of the body became unreal. In a similar manner, Manuel is larger than life because his mask is

larger than life. Basil often stresses that Manuel is Spanish. This “mask” clearly marks Manuel as the outsider whose behaviour will automatically be “different” from the others because he comes from Barcelona. Manuel is like Baker’s Charlie Chaplin-type clown who, as discussed in the previous chapter, can never be a part of the world but “will go on in spite of the myriad disasters and humiliations he [*sic*] experiences”.⁷³ Manuel is made grotesque by being both an object of pity, owing to the humiliations he suffers through the other characters, and an object of humour, which he generates through his “typical” manic farcical behaviour. Nevertheless, a character need not be overtly physical in order to be both farcical and grotesque. For example, Major Gowen does not rely on the more obvious farcical techniques – exaggerated movements and frenzied physical action – to “remove” himself from the real world and be grotesque. The Major is an elderly resident whose mental faculties are deteriorating, thus resulting in numerous scenes where he and Basil misunderstand each other. One is left with deciding whether to laugh at the Major’s mental state, or be shocked by a performance which could be interpreted as ridiculing his condition. Ultimately, it is problematic to utilise the word “grotesque” in relation to a sitcom because, in theory, the primary aim of the sitcom is that of entertainment. Therefore, it might seem to be in the authors’ best interests to eliminate any potentially grotesque scenes in case they are misconstrued and seen in a negative light. However, as was demonstrated in chapter two, through its connection with the “low” areas and “base” actions of life – while utilising more “serious”, or tragic, subject matters – farce will always dangerously straddle the grotesque line.

The most conspicuously grotesque episode in the series is *The Kipper and the Corpse* where Mr Leeman’s body is spirited around the hotel in an attempt to hide his death from the other guests. As I point out in chapter one, a dead body is used for

farcical effect in Orton's *Loot*, but as it is completely shrouded, the audience cannot develop an emotional connection with the deceased. In *Fawlty Towers*, Leeman is alive when first on screen, and after death, both his pyjama-clad figure and face are clearly visible. Through the irreverence shown towards Leeman by Basil and his staff, the corpse loses its humanity and becomes an object, or talisman. The characters work together in a vain attempt at concealing the incriminating "object" from view. The audience can be shocked at the disrespect shown to a deceased man, laugh at the complications caused by a corpse in the hotel, or be unable to choose between the two – a grotesque response.

The grotesque can be even subtler. At Sybil and Terry's insistence, Basil is convinced to take a plate of kippers past their expiry date to Leeman. After delivering the tray, opening the windows and commenting on the state of the country, Basil leaves, without realising that he had been speaking to a corpse. Polly takes up the milk for the tea, which has been left in the kitchen, and discovers that Leeman has passed away. Basil then incorrectly deduces that the kippers have poisoned Leeman and tries to dispose of them while Sybil summons another guest, Dr Price, to examine the body. Price arrives as Basil is attempting to throw the kippers out of the window. When he does not succeed at this, Basil stuffs one down his shirt. With Polly's help, Basil then endeavours to hide the fact that he was the first to "discover" the body. With Sybil present, the truth emerges and he is left to explain himself:

Basil	People don't talk that much in the morning...well, look, I'm just delivering a tray, right? If the guest isn't singing 'Oh What a Beautiful Morning' I don't immediately think, 'Oh there's another one snuffed it in the night'. Another name in the Fawlty Towers Book of Remembrance. I mean, this is a hotel, not the Burma Railway.
Sybil	Basil!
Basil	Well, I mean it does actually say 'Hotel' outside, you know. Perhaps I should be more specific. 'Hotel for people who have a better than fifty percent chance of making it through the night'...what are you looking at me like that for?
Sybil	(<i>goes over to him; quietly</i>) Basil, there's a kipper sticking out of your jumper.

Basil

Ah, there it is. I've been looking for that. That's the other one.⁷⁴

The scene is rendered grotesque with the coupling of Basil's sarcastic comments and the tragic situation. This is further emphasised through the hotel being compared – one might argue tastelessly – to the Burma Railway in order to induce laughter. Finally, there is the grotesque coupling of Basil's frantic, irrational behaviour and the composure of the other characters. Essentially, Basil, the farceur, moves into the unreal while Polly and Sybil, the comedians, remain fixed in reality. The silence after his outburst ultimately destroys the grotesque atmosphere, as it highlights the ludicrousness of Basil's behaviour and allows the audience to laugh.

The grotesque colours the whole episode as, to a certain extent, it is shaped by Basil's amorality and his further use of human talismans. While attempting to remove Leeman – camouflaged under a sheet and a few towels – from his room, Basil, Manuel and Polly meet Miss Tibbs. She becomes frenzied upon noticing the body:

Basil

She's hysterical. Slap her.

Polly tries to put her hand over Miss Tibbs' mouth but she gets bitten and withdraws the hand very fast. Manuel groans.

Miss Tibbs
Basil

Murder! Murder!
Slap her!

Polly does so. Miss Tibbs folds up and falls to the floor. Manuel drops the body.

Basil

(to Polly) Oh, spiffing! Absolutely spiffing. Well done! Two dead, twenty-five to go. (he hears a noise from downstairs) Quick, Polly!⁷⁵

After a grotesque reaction to the corpse (humorous, yet terrifying), Tibbs, like Leeman, becomes another problem-causing talisman. In order to hide them, they are taken into the nearby room of Mr and Mrs White, who – coincidentally – arrive at the very moment Basil and Manuel go inside. In desperation, both the corpse and the comatose Tibbs are hidden in a closet. This leads to a later grotesque exchange between Tibbs and Sybil:

Miss Tibbs	Oh, it was so horrible, Mrs Fawlty, you've no idea.
Sybil	Oh, I know.
Miss Tibbs	It was pitch black in there...and that thing...with its hand...
Sybil	Oh I know. (<i>gives Miss Tibbs the tea</i>) Now you have a little rest and try to think of something else.
Miss Tibbs	But anything could have happened.
Sybil	Well, he was dead, dear.
Miss Tibbs	A man is a man, Mrs Fawlty.
Sybil	(<i>slightly thrown</i>) Oh, I know... ⁷⁶

By describing Leeman as a “thing”, he is de-humanised even further. This is followed by the suggestion that Leeman could have in some way molested Miss Tibbs while in the closet, and Sybil reminding her that he was dead. A grotesque image is created: Leeman’s corpse attempting to take advantage of an elderly lady. As with the example earlier, outlining Basil’s reaction to Leeman’s death, those able to recognise the preposterousness of such a situation would tip this image off the “grotesque line” into humour. A farcical performance or an absurd statement can remind an audience that what they are seeing is ultimately unreal. However, because it takes place in the farcical world, the audience will potentially accept any situation.

Nevertheless, the incidences involving Miss Tibbs also emphasise the ability of farce to employ a variety of emotions in order to stimulate laughter. Horror and humour complement each other by being strong opposing sensations. One could postulate that the greater the grotesque polarity between emotions, the more one might react to them. This premise will be one focus of the next chapter, the subject matter of which is the laughter response. Thus far, any mention of laughter has resulted in a number of oversimplifications. For example, it has been assumed an audience would laugh at a particular line or scene without going into detail as to why they would or would not find the line hilarious. Chapter four will investigate this aspect of farce by exploring the theories on laughter expounded in the fields of philosophy, psychology and the study of physiology. These will then be used in relation to *Fawlty Towers* and what has been discussed thus far to further demonstrate the intricacies of the farcical genre.

Chapter 4

“Why are you laughing?” “Because it’s funny”. “Why is it funny?” “Because it is!” Two difficult questions followed by flippant answers, which are simultaneously simple and yet highly profound. Simple, because they depict laughter as a “thing” which “is” and hence construe it to necessitate no justification. Profound, in that they offer a tantalising invitation to discover the rationale behind so ambiguous a human activity which – at first glance – is beyond the grasp of logical clarification. It is this intriguing binary which makes laughter so complex a topic. Far from being a trifling human activity of little merit, laughter can be likened to a vast archaeological site which has been explored at length by philosophers and psychologists from Plato to Freud but so far has relinquished few treasures. A major setback in the study of laughter is that there is no mathematical formula which can guarantee laughter in every conceivable situation. (As Norman Holland points out, tickling and the use of nitrous oxide – laughing gas – can induce a laughing reaction,¹ but my concern is with laughter resulting from an amusing situation, be it “real-life”, on stage or on film.) The result is a multitude of theories. Deductions made by each theory invariably have no relevance without their contextual base. Once removed from those specific situations provided by the theorist, they can then be contradicted by other theories. Therefore, while a selection of theories on laughter will be compared and contrasted, this chapter’s main argument is that laughter is principally influenced, in one way or another, by context.²

There is the context of the individual, which relates to how the individual will react to an amusing situation. This involves both the internal context, including the personality and the emotional and physical state of the individual at the time of laughter; and the external – or environmental – context. In relation to the latter, there is firstly the

interpretation and reaction to humour and wit which can be influenced by what is transpiring in the life of the individual at the instant the laughter-inducing event is experienced. Secondly, there is the context of the shared event, comprising the influence from others at a live performance or the “canned laughter” of a sitcom. Finally, there is the wider social context including an individual’s cultural background and his/her social position. The collective response to laughter cannot be ignored because of the arguably social nature of the majority of human subjects. For example, Mary Douglas asserts that certain African tribes “are said to be dour and unlaughing [while] others laugh easily”.³ Lefcourt corroborates this when arguing that in spite of individual differences and a vast array of responses, “there is often a fair consensus in particular cultures about what is regarded as funny”.⁴ While problematic in their generalisation and provability, these assertions do suggest that – as will be discussed later – the environment or society in which we live will have some effect on what is considered amusing.

Related to context is form which can, and does, dictate laughter. Jokes, sitcoms and farces are designed to create a “climate of laughter”, resulting in a laughter response. However, this is no simple exercise, as form alone does not guarantee laughter. Put simply, some episodes of *Fawlty Towers* are considered “better” than others with each individual forming his/her own opinion as to which one is preferred. For instance, Cleeve does not believe *The Builders* to be as good as the other episodes, whereas I find it one of the better ones because – coming mainly from a performance point of view – I enjoy Cleeve’s perfectly timed nervous attacks which instigate much of the farcical chaos. Each person has a set of criteria which, once fulfilled or not, make experiencing a series like *Fawlty Towers* either pleasurable or unpleasant. These might be simple to identify, such as having a predisposition to a particular aspect of a genre –

for example the witty dialogue of comedy – or attaining enjoyment from the performance of a particular actor. Nonetheless, as pleasure is an emotion, it is usually quite difficult, if not impossible, to outline all the reasons why a person might enjoy, say, *Fawlty Towers*. Although adhering to farcical techniques will not necessarily assure a farce success, as discussed in chapter one the term “farce” immediately raises certain expectations in the individual and, if these are not fulfilled, it might become difficult to win over an audience. There is invariably a feeling of disappointment when a humorous work billed as “the funniest film ever” or “guaranteed to have you rolling in the aisles” fails to meet expectations. If a television series tries something different, the viewing public will not be familiar with the new “form” and it might take some time for it to gain an appreciative audience, even if this involves merely gaining a “cult” following. If it is not accepted, a series might simply fall into obscurity.

To take farce as my example, once the form is accepted, laughter is an observable measure of its success. Nonetheless, Bermel concludes his brief discussion on laughter by contending, “laughter is not the motive behind farce, only its principal by-product”.⁵ Portraying laughter as only a by-product might imply that it is of little importance, and, by association, so is farce. Nevertheless, from a “popular” point of view, the “funnier” the farce, the more superior it is considered to be. Farce is so intertwined with laughter, this aspect cannot be ignored or in any way belittled. Thus, I contend audience laughter to be not only a major aim of farce but also one of its principal products.

Laughter researchers – or “gelastologists”,⁶ as Robin Haig describes them – generally approach laughter from three main research areas: the physiological, the psychological, and the philosophical. From a purely physiological point of view,

laughter is fairly straightforward, with Holland giving the following outline of the laughter mechanism:

As a muscular phenomenon, laughter is easy to describe. It consists of spasmodic contractions of the large and small zygomatic (facial) muscles and sudden relaxations of the diaphragm accompanied by contractions of the larynx and epiglottis.... Experiments with electric stimuli show that laughter is reflexoid, governed by the “old brain” or “interbrain” (the thalamus and hypothalamus), along with other reflex activity and purely emotional behaviour (rage, for example). It differs, therefore, from the cognitive faculties, which the pallial cortex controls.... Laughter can also result from physical stimuli such as tickling or nitrous oxide (laughing gas). Certain diseases cause laughter, sometimes quite uncontrollable giggling.⁷

From this description, it could be concluded that laughter is an automatic reflex response which occurs naturally and spontaneously with little or no conscious thought: someone slips on a banana skin and another laughs at them, another receives a pie in the face and is equally the subject of a humorous reaction. Certain situations may induce seemingly automatic responses. However, if one had entirely no control over laughter it is conceivable that – barring individual physiological differences such as the sound produced by the person(s) laughing – every individual would laugh exactly the same amount at precisely the same situations. As this is not the case, it must be assumed that the human mind is affected by other factors such as higher cognitive activities, including problem solving and comprehending a context which will make a situation or joke amusing.⁸ Nevertheless, the reaction to a humorous action often seems spontaneous. Cause: “*Basil...firmly places a large squidgy pie in Mr Hutchinson’s crotch and another in his face*”.⁹ Effect: audience laughter. As pointed out by Lefcourt, it is up to the individual to consider something “funny” through how it is constructed, perhaps by recognising similar past events which were considered “funny”.¹⁰ Therefore, notwithstanding the pie-in-the-face routine being so hackneyed that it has become a visual cliché, it can still produce laughter. There may be those who have grown tired of it and are irritated by such a display, but it cannot be denied that it can still act as a stimulus for laughter, particularly when used in a slightly unexpected way as in the instance cited from *Fawlty Towers*.

Robert Provine asserts how experiments performed on novice actors demonstrate how difficult it is to laugh on cue without a stimulus.¹¹ Laughter may be “under weak conscious control”¹² but the stimulus may take many forms: physical humour, a witty comment, the sound of others laughing, and so forth. Once again, without context there is no laughter.¹³ While the study of the physiology of laughter goes far in explaining the physical act of laughter, it is limited in being able to explain the motivation behind it. On the other hand, while the “scientific” psychological approach might be assumed to be more successful, it too has been unable to unlock the secret to laughter. One obstacle, according to Provine, is that it is difficult to create laughter in a controlled environment.¹⁴ It is easy to know when something is funny – people are laughing – but one can never completely understand why. While Provine’s psychological approach is very clear on when people laugh – the motivation not taken into account by the physiological methods – it can offer no answers to “why”. This leaves the philosophical theories to answer this question.¹⁵ However, Paul McGhee makes the following apt point on the philosophical theories:

There is a diverse range of views designed to explain various stimulus, cognitive, response, physiological, psychodynamic, and social characteristics of humor. Intuitively, one is inclined to believe that most of the views discussed have some degree of validity. In most cases, they have a ring of truth because of their consistency with private experience. Yet, each position seems very narrow, leaving unexplained much more than is explained.¹⁶

This leaves the philosophical approaches open to such criticism as that offered by Provine who states that such theories are based on logic and anecdote rather than the gathering of empirical data, making them flawed because there is no way to “scientifically” or statistically prove they are correct.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the philosophical approach does allow one to explain – or, more correctly, conceptualise – the unexplainable. Once again – stemming from McGhee’s comment – the “correct” answer as to why one laughs is very much a personal issue, and that “ring of truth”

which a person may see in a theory will validate it for that individual. Therefore, the following statement by Lefcourt will remain as a basis for all my findings on laughter:

In psychology, one strategy for dealing with uncertainties and awareness that we can never know anything with finality is called *constructivism*. This is the assumption that what investigators study is not so much the phenomenon itself as constructions of it. That is, in our study of phenomena we are always examining and testing our theoretical constructions about the way things or persons in the world operate, and the information gleaned from such study can be useful, interesting, and stimulating, encouraging us to further investigation. However, our research and study can never provide us with “final answers” or truths, because whatever we study can also be examined using other constructs.¹⁸

Difficulties arise when one attempts to use only one theory to describe and explain all laughter. Once an individual is comfortable with a theory, he/she might find evidence to make it “work” and exclude all others. One problem with this approach is that it can ignore the complexities of laughter. There is joyful laughter, cruel laughter, nervous laughter, horrid laughter, ironic laughter, and sympathetic laughter. The list is practically endless. I would argue that from a farcical point of view the laughter directed at characters like Basil Fawlty would principally be joyful laughter, as the farcical form dictates that one of its aims is to divert the spectator. However, one could argue that some people may take a perverted pleasure in watching Basil suffer, while others would not laugh as they would find such pain unpleasant. Thus, nervous laughter could well be present, as well as cruel laughter. I therefore agree with McGhee, who states that “it is preposterous...to try to explain cognitive, social, motivational, and physiological aspects of humor within a single explanatory system”.¹⁹ Nonetheless, it is possible, as Haig does, to widen the understanding of the field by offering a summary of the basic approaches.

For the sake of simplicity, Haig divides laughter theories into five main groups: these encompass incongruity; changes in affect or tension; superiority; social communication (or commentary) – including control and modulation; and psychoanalytic approaches.²⁰ The incongruity theories rely on the sudden resolution of

a particular incongruity set up by the farce, script, joke, situation and so on.²¹ Holland further divides incongruity theories into three groups: cognitive, ethical and formal.²² Incongruities are similar to the grotesque in literature, and in cognitive incongruities one may “laugh when something affirms and denies the same proposition simultaneously”.²³ Any misunderstanding creates a cognitive incongruity, particularly when Basil finds himself in a compromising situation. Although the audience knows that there is a perfectly innocent explanation to him accidentally touching Raylene Miles’ breast in *The Psychiatrist* (“without looking, he reaches out of the bathroom for the switch”²⁴), it is understandable how Sybil could get the wrong idea. In ethical incongruities, laughter is generated when there is an incongruity between such things as “the noble and the contemptible, the high and the low, the sacred and the profane, the splendid and the scorned – finally good and evil”.²⁵ For example, in *The Kipper and the Corpse* the dead body of Mr Leeman is not given the respect usually due a deceased person as he is roughly moved from one room to another by Manuel and Basil. Formal incongruities involve “something harmful presented harmlessly”,²⁶ such as the unreal violence of farce and, more specifically, the verbal exchanges between Basil and Sybil. The insults they throw at each other have no lasting impact, particularly the “harmful” ones Basil inflicts on Sybil, which she casually ignores.

The change in affect or tension theories can be explained using the following scene from *Basil the Rat* where Basil informs Sybil that Manuel has a pet rat:

Sybil	Well, why didn’t you check?
Basil	What?
Sybil	Well, you mean he’s had it a whole year and you’ve only just found out?
Basil	Yes.
Sybil	Well, supposing the Health Inspector had seen it.
Basil	I know.
Sybil	He could have closed us down....Well, what are you going to do with it, Basil?
	You can’t keep it here.
Basil	I know.
Sybil	And don’t let it loose in the garden, he’ll come back in the house.

Basil

Can't we get you on 'Mastermind', Sybil? Next contestant Sybil Fawltly from Torquay, special subject the bleeding obvious. I wasn't **going** to let it out in the garden.²⁷

Sybil builds the tension by stating the obvious and repeating what Basil had told Manuel in a previous scene. Basil's final comment transforms, as Haig puts it, the "apprehensive arousal into a pleasurable arousal by laughter".²⁸ If this scene were a joke, Basil's observation would be the punch line where the audience's expectations would finally be resolved with a witty comment or play on words.

For Haig, "superiority theories focus on the sudden perception of one individual as being superior to another as the basis for the laughter".²⁹ To employ the same example as in the tension release theories – while Basil is generally inferior to Sybil, his final comment reverses the roles, with laughter being directed at Sybil through Basil's witty comment of her stating the "bleeding obvious". The final two groups – social commentary and the psychoanalytical approaches – embrace the theories of the twentieth century's most influential gelastologists: Henri Bergson (social) and Sigmund Freud (psychoanalytical). Bergson is useful in that much of what he proposes relates directly to farce. According to Haig, Bergson used French farce as his starting point.³⁰

Social communication theories refer to the relationships between the various characters and the bond made between the characters and the audience. As stated by Haig, they "might focus on social control, conflict or cohesion, address attitudes of joker and audience, or speculate about racist jokes and primitive inter-group rivalries".³¹ However, as audience reaction (laughter) is of fundamental importance to social communication theories, one must consider how laughter is generated in a social situation. Bergson believed that only humans could be amusing, and if an animal or object is found humorous it is because it has been anthropomorphised and one can

perceive in it a human characteristic.³² For example, in *Basil the Rat*, the rat could be considered humorous because it is given quasi-human characteristics by being named after the lead character. By giving the rat further “life” through being anthropomorphised, it is a simple step to Bermel’s premise that objects in farce gain a life of their own and are seen to be “out to get” the other characters.

Bergson also argues for the “*absence of feeling* which usually accompanies laughter”.³³ In other words, it is only by distancing oneself from the object of laughter that it can be laughed at. For example, if a person were to fall down while roller-skating, and scream in agony while clutching at their broken leg, an emotional bond might develop between the roller-skater and the spectators, resulting in them feeling sympathetic towards the skater’s pain and rushing forward to offer assistance. However, as Bergson states, “look upon life as a disinterested spectator: [and] many a drama will turn into a comedy”.³⁴ Bergson explains that to laugh, one needs to experience “a momentary anesthesia of the heart”.³⁵ As quoted by Holland, Mel Brooks goes even further and says, “Tragedy is if I cut my finger. Comedy is if you walk into an open sewer and die”.³⁶ In other words, if something unpleasant is happening to someone else and you are not involved, it will be funny. If one accepts this seemingly cynical theory, it could be assumed that laughter contains a sadistic streak. Farcical laughter might be considered even more so because of the generalised use of violence. However, as outlined in previous chapters, the violence is unreal. Therefore, if the aforementioned skater were to fall in a very “unreal” manner, with legs flailing in the air while being catapulted by the momentum of the roller-skates for a great distance and come out of the situation relatively unscathed, the whole spectacle might become humorous. If, on the other hand, the skater were badly injured, the laughter of friends would stop, whereas, a “disinterested spectator” may well continue to laugh because, by

being emotionally distant, the situation would remain unreal to them. The example of the roller-skater highlights another aspect central to Bergson's theories: inelasticity. According to Bergson, laughter is further generated when a human being behaves like a machine, rigidly unable to halt his/her own actions. As Bergson puts it, in a humorous situation like the one outlined above, "something mechanical has been encrusted on the living"³⁷ and,

through lack of elasticity, through absentmindedness and a kind of physical obstinacy *as a result, in fact, of rigidity or of momentum*, the muscles continued to perform the same movement when the circumstances of the case called for something else.³⁸

If the roller-skater had stopped that forward momentum there would not have been any laughter in others brought about through an unsolicited fall.

This inelasticity is seen clearly in farce – and particularly in *Fawlty Towers* – both in the speeded-up physical action, which may include a fall, and in the characters stubbornly continuing on their chosen course of action in spite of how ridiculous or inappropriate it may be. Furthermore, one can view this concept as connecting with Bermel's theory of there being an "external" flaw in farce³⁹ which would force inelasticity upon a character as fate takes control of his/her life. As the situation becomes increasingly unreal, the audience distances itself emotionally from the performers. In *Fawlty Towers*, one can laugh at Basil's misfortunes – no matter how terrible they are – because of the emotional distance placed between Basil and the spectator. Utilising Bergson's theory, people unable to distance themselves emotionally from the action of *Fawlty Towers* will be empathetic – or hostile – towards Basil (or any other character). They would then feel uncomfortable when observing his misfortunes – or actions – and consequently be negatively disposed to the series.

Finally, as stated by Haig, the psychoanalytical approach involves,

Focus[ing] on the lifting of repressions regarding aggression, sexuality and other taboo subjects in the audience which results in surplus “energy” being available for laughter. Energy might also become available from the comic exaggeration of movement in this joke which the listener does not have to undergo, and therefore has available, which is expressed through laughter.⁴⁰

In other words, as farcical characters tackle taboo subjects (the audience’s hidden fears and desires), laughter results from the characters “convicting” themselves while the spectators remain innocent. Employing Freudian and Aristotelian theories as a springboard, Eric Bentley states that farce:

Offer[s] a special opportunity: shielded by delicious darkness and seated in warm security, we enjoy the privilege of being totally passive while on stage our most treasured unmentionable wishes are fulfilled before our eyes by the most violently active human beings that ever sprang from human imagination. In that application of the formula which is bedroom farce, we savour the adventure of adultery, ingeniously exaggerated in the highest degree, and all without taking responsibility or suffering the guilt. Our wives may be with us leading the laughter.⁴¹

This brings to bear the concept of tragic catharsis where, as stated by Aristotle, the audience is purified of “destructive and painful acts”.⁴² The characters are scapegoats for the audience, which is purged of its hidden desires. However, Bentley’s theory is a problematic one. As stated above, it takes psychoanalysis as its base. Bentley’s position regarding why people would react with laughter assumes that every audience member has identical hidden desires, and they are being expressed on stage or screen. It is interesting to note that in most farces when adultery is attempted, it is rarely fulfilled because the humour is found in failure, not success. As demonstrated in the first chapter when examining *Two Into One*, the danger of discovery drives the play forward and creates amusement in the audience. Discovery would end the play as there would no longer be a reason for the lies and complications generated as the characters attempt to hide things from each other. The psychoanalytic approach is further brought into question by Corrigan who, as quoted in chapter two, suggested that certain taboo subjects – particularly promiscuous sexuality – are now outdated. Nonetheless, as I went on to argue, the transgressed taboos must be seen from the point of view of the farceur. For example, in *Communication Problems*, going against Sybil’s long-standing

rule, Basil places a bet on a horse and wins some money. For the rest of the episode Basil is in mortal fear of being discovered. What to anyone else might be a small misdemeanour is to Basil the height of rebellion, practically punishable by death. While responses such as Basil's would appear ridiculous in the "real life" of the audience, it is only by entering the world of *Fawlty Towers* and accepting its "rules" that one can accept the actions taking place and be entertained by them.

As can be seen in the above explanations, laughter theories tend to have a narrow focus, limited to specific examples purposely chosen by their authors in order to fit the theory. Nevertheless, some late-twentieth-century theorists strive to be all encompassing, as can be noted in Moses Bainy's introduction where he states:

I can give firm assurance that, after reading this book, and providing you have fully understand my theory of *The Sudden Perception of Dual Values*, you will be able to understand in every instance what it is that makes you laugh.⁴³

In spite of his declaration that his book holds all the answers, Bainy's argument would not function without the contextual base he creates for his theory. However, unlike the theories of, for example, Freud and Bergson which attempt to embrace all laughter-producing events, Bainy's theory is more specific, taking into account individual differences, implying that each laughter event is produced by diverse stimuli in differing situations. Bainy's theory is useful in that he "splits" the individual into three facets – the philosophical, psychological and physiological – which coincide with the main approaches to laughter explored so far.⁴⁴ Bainy states that the

Philosophical...involves the cognitive judgement that our value system has perceived an irruption of negative and positive values. The second stage is psychological and involves the transformation of the perceived values into negative and positive emotions. And thirdly, if the emotions are sufficiently strong, our final judgement on the situation is physically expressed through laughter.⁴⁵

While Bainy's technique fits the incongruity model, his breakdown of the laughter response is more practical than other theories in being both coherent and systematic.

Utilising a scene from *Gourmet Night* where Basil and Manuel are preparing the culinary evening will demonstrate how this technique functions:

In the dining room; it is Gourmet Night. A hand-painted Polly-style menu proclaims 'Gourmet Night at Fawlty Towers'. Basil is adjusting cutlery on one of the tables. He picks up a spoon and looks at it.

Basil	Manuel! <i>(Manuel takes the spoon, breathes heavily on it, wipes it on his napkin and replaces it; Basil picks it up and gives it to him again)</i> Get a clean one.
Manuel	Is clean now.
Basil	<i>(wiping the spoon on Manuel's hair)</i> Is dirty now. ⁴⁶

First, Manuel's behaviour is designed to arouse a spectator's attitude to hygiene, and there is a conflict between cleanliness and filthiness. Then, on a psychological/emotional level the individual may either be disgusted by this breach of hygiene or amused by such ridiculous behaviour. Finally, if a person is more disgusted than amused, a feeling of distaste will develop, but if the amusement is stronger than the disgust, the individual will laugh. On the other hand, Basil's reaction is more firmly rooted in the situational context and if one's cognitive judgement is based on having firm beliefs on the "right and wrong" treatment of others together with notions of punishment and forgiveness, the scene would be interpreted differently. Psychologically, a person may be shocked by Basil's childish – and cruel – punishment of Manuel's actions. (The script does not mention him hitting Manuel with the spoon, which he does on screen.) Conversely, the juvenile punishment may be interpreted as a just penalty for a childish action, with the latter leading to laughter. As previously argued, Bainy's theory is open to interpretation, and it will only operate effectively if every human mind and body reacts in precisely the ways he predicts. Hence, my breakdown of the scene from *Gourmet Night* is open to criticism, as it is not the sole manner of interpreting the scene. Other scholars might find different aspects which could be highlighted and explored.

Once again, it is the contextual base which acts as a springboard for one's interpretation of the laughter event. Bainy's theory is useful in that it alerts the "gelastologer" to the sophistication of the human individual and the importance of approaching the situation from as many different angles as possible in order to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon. I have taken Bainy's basic idea and simplified it, not to produce a theory, but as an attempt to understand what is involved – in the broadest terms possible – in the production of laughter within the context of the individual. It is important to realise that the three aspects under consideration are not independent, but interact and rely on one another, often with overlapping characteristics. The dividing line between philosophy and psychology, for example, is often blurred because of the difficulty in compartmentalising the extremely multifaceted human being. Thus, the philosophical, psychological and physiological are all a part of the same individual and it is impossible to fully separate the three as their effects on laughter – as Bainy argues – are practically simultaneous.⁴⁷

The philosophical relates to beliefs and opinions. It will generate a life philosophy, and influence how one may think and/or interpret the world and the various situations experienced. A person's predisposition to laughter will influence the quantity of laughter generated. According to Bainy, a person with a sense of humour is able to make light of any situation, be it positive or negative, whereas "a person with no sense of humour is one whose value system is unable to see in a given situation that the perceived negative value is of less importance than his or her own positive values".⁴⁸ For example, a profound respect for the dead could lead to a person finding *The Kipper and the Corpse* distasteful, whereas a person who understands the "given situation" – the context of the event within the farce form – may be very fond of that episode as they can enjoy the high content of "black" humour. The production of laughter can further

be connected to a person's likes and dislikes: if one deems all physical humour to be ridiculous and is aggravated by the sound of recorded laughter, then these will act as laughter inhibitors. On another level, the socio-cultural context of the individual could play a part in laughter production. In *A Touch of Class*, a confidence artist posing as a Lord deceives Basil out of some money. After having discovered "Lord" Melbury's deceitfulness, Basil becomes quite violent and the chaos which envelops the hotel offends two prospective clients – Sir Richard and Lady Morris – who are depicted as being small-minded individuals who consider the mayhem as being a direct insult to their sensibilities. In an extreme example, a person having the same socio-economic background as the two aristocrats might be offended by the episode and not laugh. As the only "real" representatives of their socio-economic group, the actions of Sir Richard and Lady Morris could imply that all people with a title behave snobbishly, with the episode acting as a criticism of the English "upper class".

Whereas philosophical issues are related to beliefs and values, psychology relates to how one's state of mind – at the time of experiencing a performance – will influence behaviour.⁴⁹ In other words, one may be psychologically primed to laugh, principally by being manoeuvred into a particular frame of mind through form and structure. A humorous incident in a tragedy could induce laughter – as I point out in the discussion on *Hamlet* in chapter two – but if a play is billed as a tragedy one would expect its plot to be predominantly tragic. Likewise, to employ Bergson's point of view, a comedy or farce with characters who invoke too much sympathy might spoil the overall mood of the performance. For example, if Andrew Sachs emphasised Manuel's discomfort at being treated unfairly, and/or being struck by Basil, it would be more difficult to laugh at him (or Basil). However, Sachs' farcical performance of Manuel – the slightly over-the-top acting, the ability to "bounce back", and the singleness of

purpose, among other farcical qualities – prevents him from being treated too seriously, and sympathetically, by the audience. Furthermore, the amount of laughter generated also relates to what may be going on in a person's life and how they are “pre-programmed” when experiencing a farce. A good mood results in more laughter than a bad mood. Problems such as relationship issues, money problems, exams and other stressful situations might inhibit one's reaction to a farce. In addition, specific occurrences might trigger painful memories: the recent death of a close family member may make the watching of *The Kipper and the Corpse* difficult. Philosophically, one may be an eternal optimist, but when internal or external events affect one's psychology, the reaction to humour may be quite different.

The physiological element to laughter includes both the act of laughter and those physical stimuli which may induce or inhibit laughter. As pointed out by Lefcourt, the laughter sounds emitted by humans vary from person to person.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the louder and more energetically a person laughs, the more it can be assumed that he/she is enjoying a performance. External influences could be fairly mundane including, as Bermel points out, “the time of day, the company we're in, the setting ... the weather, our state of health ... the upholstery, the people sitting nearby, and other given circumstances”.⁵¹ Any distractions, which might make a person feel uncomfortable will reduce laughter production, as they are unable to remain completely focused on the performance. Whether laughter tracks – in the case of many television comedies – should be placed in the psychological or physiological paradigms is debatable. Provine indicates that experiments in this area have proven inconclusive and there is still the question as to whether or not there is a neuronal connection in the brain which induces laughter upon hearing it in others. Therefore, the extent to which laughter might or might not be contagious is debatable. However, it can be argued that a person may feel

more comfortable laughing energetically if others are also laughing. The sound of laughter might make them feel less self-conscious. What is interesting in this debate is the social aspect of laughter, which further blurs the line between the physical and the psychological.

Laughter's social context and the context of shared laughter are of vital importance. Provine's psychological study on why people laugh began with him taking his student subjects into a laboratory. Then, as individuals or in small groups, they were exposed to humorous audio and video recordings. However, his "comic virtuosi elicited only a few grudging chuckles from the lab-bound subjects who would go stone sober when brought into a laboratory".⁵² Apparently, Provine's subjects felt the laboratory setting an unsuitable laughter environment, and their attention may have drifted. While the idea of being scrutinised probably made the subjects feel self-conscious, the seats may have been uncomfortable, and the room imposing. This emphasises the importance of the environmental context which – in order to prompt laughter – must position a person in a positive state of mind and make them feel completely at ease. Any negative distractions in the philosophical, psychological and/or physical domains would divert the focus off the object of laughter. Provine concluded that laughter is a social behaviour which "virtually disappears in isolated people being scrutinized in a laboratory setting".⁵³ He left his laboratory and together with three undergraduate students decided to eavesdrop on the conversations and laughter of anonymous people in public places. After listening to and analysing 1,200 laugh episodes,⁵⁴ Provine came up with a number of conclusions, the first being that "females are the leading laughers, but males are the best laugh getters".⁵⁵ While contentious in its gendered division, this could explain why Basil and Manuel are the main farceurs in *Fawlty Towers*, whereas Sybil and Polly generally play the more "sensible" comic

characters. This also fits in with Bermel's depiction of the archetypal farcical female characters as having "roles which make them less the prisoners of tradition or convention than men are".⁵⁶ In most of the farces I have alluded to in this thesis, the male characters are generally the "victims" of fate, desperately attempting to get out of some kind of trouble. Women tend to be more level headed, not becoming as frantic as their male counterparts.

Provine also discovered that of the 1,200 laugh episodes, only 0.1% were interrupted by speaker laughter:

Thus a speaker may say, "You are going where? ... ha-ha", but rarely "You are going ... ha-ha ... where?" This strong and orderly relationship between laughter and speech is akin to punctuation in written communication and is termed the *punctuation effect* ... *The brains of the speaker and the audience are locked in a dual-processing mode.*⁵⁷

The audience interrupted no laughter episodes. Provine is unsure as to whether the laughter is cued by the speaker or if there is a biological inhibitor which prevents one from speaking/listening and laughing at the same time. The aspect relevant to this study is Provine's comment that what is critical in joke telling is the "timing, the pace of story telling, the setting up, and delivery of the punch line – and most importantly ... the pause that follows the punch line".⁵⁸ To a stand-up comedian, and an actor, the presentation of amusing material is as important as the material. According to Provine, if a joke is continued too soon after the punch line, laughter is not only discouraged but "crowds out ... [and] neurologically *inhibits* audience laughter".⁵⁹ As noted in chapter one, if one reads a farce, especially plays by Ray Cooney and Michael Pertwee, and the *Fawlty Towers* scripts, one notices that the vast majority of the lines are quite short. There are no long monologues, but rather a continuous verbal exchange between the characters, permitting many instances where an actor might pause for laughter. As discussed in previous chapters, a fast pace is very important in farce and the lines are designed to get ideas across quickly, in as economical a way as possible. When lines

are much longer than “normal”, the punctuation effect takes over.⁶⁰ In this sense, the punctuation effect involves the actor attempting to control where the audience will laugh through how he/she delivers a line. For example, in *Fawlty Towers*, long lines are conveyed rapidly with no upward inflection until the end to alert the audience that the speech has been completed. This can be noted specifically in Sybil’s extended lines: each statement builds on the previous one to take an audience to a heightened level of tension until the end of the line where, according to the tension release theories, this tension is released through laughter. However, no actor can fully control an audience and predict when it will laugh. Moreover, a large audience will most probably instigate additional – and longer – pauses than a small one because of the greater likelihood of laughter. A good actor should have the ability of inserting a laughter pause whenever it is required, perhaps repeating a line which had been interrupted or not heard by the audience in order to eliminate any confusion. However, as discussed in chapters one and three, if a pause is too long it will disrupt the flow of the play and slow down the action. As I pointed out in chapter three, Cleave attempted to minimise pauses as his objective was the much smaller home audience which will never laugh as long or as loudly as a studio audience. On the other hand, the extensive use of physical humour meant that, by being visual, it would not be obscured by laughter, and “stage” business need not be halted.

Possibly the most important aspect of laughter revealed by Provine, and relevant to this study, was that in the vast majority of cases laughter was generated not through jokes or humorous statements but by seemingly “innocuous lines [such] as ‘I’ll see you guys later’ or ‘Are you sure?’”⁶¹ The reason for this is once again connected to context. And, in order to understand them, one must be privy to a great deal of information. Hearing the final section of a laughter-inducing conversation could be completely

meaningless when taken out of context, and is likened to listening to the punch line of an extremely amusing joke without having heard the rest of it.⁶² However, even more importantly, for innocuous statements to be considered humorous, one must be acquainted with both the people involved in the conversation and their personal background, as the laughter could be directly linked to a previous conversation, or an occurrence which was found amusing. “You had to be there” is a common expression directed to a person who cannot understand why a comment on a recalled event is considered amusing. In a social situation, a comment might be intentionally amusing, by being expressed in a strange or humorous manner, or act as a parody of what has been said in the past. Similarly, farce often makes use of parody and satire, but neither would work without a suitable contextual base. For example, in *The Builders*, Manuel nonreflexively parodies Basil’s mannerisms. The more familiar one is with Basil’s personality, the more humorous the situation will seem, as, without the juxtaposition of the knowledge of the original with its mimic, parody is impossible. In spite of being treated so badly, Manuel respects Basil and goes out of his way to be helpful in every situation. He does not attempt to ridicule Basil but endeavours to copy his words and mannerisms perfectly as if they were the ultimate form of social behaviour. Manuel produces a very subtle farcical performance with the laughter directed at both himself for attempting to “be” Basil and at Basil for having, inadvertently, taught Manuel how to behave in such a manner. Only by knowing the characters’ backgrounds can one understand, and appreciate, this scene. Returning to social situations, the reliance on context, makes it no surprise that Provine states, “most pre-laugh dialogue [found in “every day” situations] is like that of an interminable situation comedy scripted by an extremely ungifted writer”.⁶³ As with a professional comedian, word delivery and presentation can influence meaning and interpretation, but even humorous intention can be of little value if a disinterested observer does not know the contextual background.

As with Provine's examples, the dialogue in *Fawlty Towers* is not characterised by one joke after another, but usually consists of general conversation between the characters which, within the context of the sitcom, could be considered amusing. When considering situational context, one needs to take into account not only what has already taken place in a specific episode but events of past episodes. A character with a well-developed personality can lead to an audience being able to envisage a typical response to each situation. Therefore, like Provine's "real life" situations, a comment or circumstance is amusing only if, firstly, one understands what is taking place; secondly, everything which has influenced it; and, finally, what it may be referring to. A humorous situation must be "set up", as in this example from *The Builders*:

The hotel lobby. Polly is behind the desk sorting mail. A guest approaches the desk.

Guest	...Sorry, I forgot my key. <i>(Gives Polly the key and leaves.)</i>
Polly	Oh, thanks. <i>(the phone rings; she answers it)</i> Hallo, Fawlty Towers...yes...yes...no, this afternoon, that'd be fine...no, it's sixteen Elwood Avenue...sixteen, that's it. Thank you.
	<i>She rings off. Basil comes down the stairs carrying two suitcases, followed by Sybil.</i>
Basil	I'll put these outside, shall I dear?
	<i>He goes out through the main entrance. Sybil gives Polly a piece of paper.</i>
Sybil	Polly, this is where we'll be if you need us. There's the number. So if Mr Stubbs wants to know anything when he comes, just ring, but don't if you don't have to, love, it's the first weekend we've had off since Audrey had her hysterectomy.
Polly	Not to worry. I know what they've got to do. Oh, and somebody called about a garden gnome.
Sybil	Oh, yes.
Polly	Well, it's in, and they're going to deliver it this afternoon. ⁶⁴

The first part of this scene is straightforward, with Polly delivering important information which will have an humorous impact later in the episode when a man delivers the gnome, asking if he has the right address. Manuel misunderstands him believing the man to be requesting room number sixteen for the garden gnome. This then leads to both characters considering the other insane, and Manuel, refusing to give the gnome a room, places it behind the desk. Later, Basil, who knows nothing of the

gnome's arrival, trips over it and falls. This infuriates him, and when he discovers that Sybil ordered the gnome, attempts to strangle it in her place. This incident acts as a surprise to the audience because it had its contextual basis in very inconspicuous circumstances. Thus, in spite of a sitcom being made up of "everyday" language made humorous through its context, the situations often imitate a basic joke outline. Using Provine's example, which follows the tension release theory of laughter, a joke has two basic requirements – surprise and coherence – and "begins by establishing an expectancy that is violated by the surprise of the punch line".⁶⁵ The joke is set up in *Fawlty Towers* with the garden gnome playing a number of roles with which it is not usually associated. The episode ends with Basil walking down the driveway of the hotel with the gnome, saying to Sybil, "I'm going to see Mr O'Reilly, dear".⁶⁶ This visual/verbal "punch line" is humorous because of his statement earlier in the episode when he says to O'Reilly over the phone, "If you're not here in twenty minutes with my door, I shall come over and insert a large garden gnome in you. Good day".⁶⁷

Conversely, the following incident in *The Psychiatrist* requires much more information than what is available in that episode:

Miss Tibbs	Mr Fawlty.
Basil	(jumping slightly) Mm?
Miss Tibbs	Did you know there's a psychiatrist staying?
Basil	...Yes, yes I did.
Miss Gatsby	Has he come for the Major?
Basil	What?
Miss Tibbs	Has he come for the Major?
Basil	No.
Miss Gatsby	Oh good!
Miss Tibbs	We were rather worried. ⁶⁸

There is much contextual information to be taken into account when understanding why people would laugh at this exchange. Miss Tibbs' comment, in asking Basil if he knows that there is a psychiatrist staying, seems fairly innocuous. However, in an earlier scene Basil reacts very irrationally when he discovers that one of his guests is a

psychiatrist. Basil becomes quite paranoid and very defensive, believing anyone in that profession to be “nosing around”⁶⁹ in other people’s private affairs, and possibly uncovering things about himself which he does not want to confront, or be made known to others. Therefore, Miss Tibbs’ comment is humorous in that the audience makes a correlation between her statement and Basil’s prejudices. Miss Tibbs delivers this information very seriously and conspiratorially to quietly alert Basil to the psychiatrist’s presence. This can be likened to someone not wanting to start a panic by openly discussing a potential threat. She, like Basil, sees the psychiatrist in a very negative light and heightens the tension in the scene by worrying if the psychiatrist is there to take the Major “away”. The Major’s erratic behaviour, coupled with Miss Tibbs’ remark and Basil’s caustic comments regarding the Major’s shaky sanity, make him a perfect candidate for “professional help”. If Miss Tibbs had asked if Sybil were being “taken away” the scene would not have made sense because Sybil – like Polly – is the most rational of all the characters. Laughter is directed at Miss Tibbs and Basil because of their paranoid beliefs regarding the psychiatrist, and their implication that he is very dangerous.

Another aspect which will instigate laughter is the catchphrase. Throughout the series Manuel is described as being from Barcelona, and what starts out as a simple explanation (“he’s from Barcelona”⁷⁰) is constantly repeated throughout the series, either as an insult or as an attempt to explain Manuel’s apparently erratic behaviour – which is primarily caused by his difficulties with the English language. In *Communication Problems*, the catchphrase is used to good effect after Basil orders Manuel to tell nobody about the money he (Basil) won on a horse. True to his word, Manuel says “I know nothing I am from Barcelona”⁷¹ right at the moment when Basil needs him to tell the truth. The juxtaposition of Manuel attempting to do the right

thing by Basil, while saying the catchphrase – used by Basil to demonstrate Manuel’s supposed dim-wittedness – creates a humorous situation with Basil outsmarting himself by having instructed Manuel too efficiently. As with canned laughter, the catchphrase might theoretically stimulate laughter, perhaps by recalling past humorous events. Dennis and Valentina McInerney discuss the famous experiment conducted by Ivan Pavlov who made a dog salivate by showing it some meat (an unconditioned stimulus which “produces a reflex or unlearned response”⁷²) while ringing a bell (a neutral stimulus). After continually pairing the meat with the bell, the dog would salivate even if the bell alone were rung. The dog would now associate the bell with the meat and react as it would with food. This technique is known as Classical conditioning, and just as the bell – or conditioned stimulus – would elicit salivation in Pavlov’s dog, a catchphrase could trigger laughter in an audience. Although a catchphrase may not be humorous in itself, by being connected to laughter early in the series the laughter response could be seen as automatic. Nevertheless, although one could interpret the response to a catchphrase as mechanical, it is its situational context which allows one to perceive its humorous potential.

Returning to the social aspect of laughter, Provine states that, “laughter is the quintessential human social signal. Laughter is about relationships”⁷³ and friends and group members can be defined as “those with whom you laugh”.⁷⁴ Two points stand out: first, as with the environmental conditions, the social conditions must place the prospective laugher at ease; and secondly, one’s inclusion (or exclusion) in a group will affect laughter. In order to explore this, Provine conducted a further experiment, this time with his undergraduate students who were told to keep a logbook recording “their own laughter, its time of occurrence, and its social circumstances”.⁷⁵ Bearing in mind the problematic aspects of such an experiment – for example, the accuracy of self-

surveillance and the subject being aware of taking part in an experiment – what was discovered was that the “logbook keepers laughed about *30 times* more when they were around others than when they were alone – laughter almost disappeared among solitary subjects not exposed to media stimulation”.⁷⁶ Therefore, laughter is enjoyed if one feels part of a group, with one major prerequisite being the ability to share “in-jokes” generated through common interests. Even Bergson states that “laughter is always the laughter of the group however spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers”.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, as suggested by Lefcourt, laughter can be “as ugly as delightful”⁷⁸ and, following Reinhard Lempp, he highlights the distinction between sociopositive and socionegative laughter: “the former is said to enhance solidarity in a group, whereas the latter is malicious humor derived from the exclusion of someone from a group”.⁷⁹

In relation to farce and *Fawlty Towers*, an audience is primed by being placed in a situation where they may experience a shared event. The “in-joke” is the farce being played out before them, and each individual in the audience becomes a member of a select group whose “task” is to laugh *together* at the antics of the various characters. However, Basil must not laugh because that would automatically make him a part of the group. As suggested by Provine, just as laughter generates inclusiveness, “group members [can] coordinate their laughter to jeer and exclude outsiders”,⁸⁰ and Basil must be excluded from the group if one is to laugh at him. One point which Provine appears to overlook, is the friendly heckling directed at those within a group. This I would class as sociopositive because it breaks down barriers by making people comfortable enough to laugh at each other and not be offended. Whereas the subjects of that laughter might join in and see it as a friendly game, rather than malicious amusement, Basil Fawlty remains serious right to the end, distancing himself from the audience, and never

relaxing and “joining in” with the audience’s “fun”. To take the following example from the beginning of *The Wedding Party*:

Sybil lets out a real cackle. Basil looks round in disgust

Basil	(to Mrs Peignoir) Please don’t alarm yourself. That’s only my wife laughing. I’m afraid her local finishing school was bombed.
Mrs Peignoir	Oh dear!
Basil	No, no, not really, just a thought. Well now, what can I get you? ⁸¹

Basil’s comment on Sybil’s finishing school works on a number of levels: Mrs Peignoir does not find Basil’s comment comical, as she assumed that he is being serious. The joke is on Basil because his failure to make Mrs Peignoir realise that he is being witty creates a farcical, rather than a comical, scene. From the audience’s point of view, Basil’s insulting of Sybil could be interpreted in three ways: because her finishing school was supposedly bombed there is the implication that she was unable to complete her schooling and her strange laughter is a result of her being left a “common”, ignorant and uneducated woman. Basil also insults Sybil’s age by implying that she was at finishing school during World War II when it is conceivable that the school could have been bombed. Finally, the bomb blast and sudden loss of her school could have shocked Sybil into insanity and, hence, caused her to laugh in a strange manner. Even after telling Mrs Peignoir that he was only joking, Basil persists in insulting Sybil by saying “just a thought”, implying that it would have been good if Sybil’s finishing school had been bombed, preferably with Sybil in it. Nevertheless, none of these deductions would be possible without situation and character background information, such as being familiar with how Basil and Sybil’s relationship functions.

The requirement for total seriousness – on Basil’s part – becomes even more apparent when approaching laughter from the context of the stress-relieving theories, while being coupled with research conducted by Seymour and Rhonda Fisher on the lives of stand-up comedians. The comedians generally began being “funny” early in

life, especially by acting as the class clown, encouraging laughter through their antics and going against a hated school establishment.⁸² Many had grown up in difficult circumstances and developed “resilience and psychological toughness” because they had been forced to grow up quickly and assume “adult-like responsibilities early in adolescence”.⁸³ In a similar manner, Lefcourt discusses the childhood of actors Richard Pryor and Carol Burnett, who alleviated family problems by playing the clown and instigating laughter in the household.⁸⁴ He then goes on to argue:

Noncomedians too may use humor as a tool for ameliorating difficult situations. However, there may be less urgency in their behaviour because the circumstances in which they function may seem less dangerous. Their humor, therefore, may appear to be less habitual, less manic, and less controlling of others than that of comedians.⁸⁵

However, although Basil wittily insults Sybil – and often attempts to be droll – when backed into a difficult situation he never tries to ease his problems through laughter or humour. Basil is a farceur through and through, exerting all his energy to fight the chaos in his life, but, unlike a comedian, he attempts to accomplish this in absolute seriousness. As he strives towards his goal his anxiety and panic increase, as he is unable to discover a simpler – and less painful – solution. Basil cannot distance himself from what is going on around him, nor analyse the situations he finds himself in logically and clearly. A major reason for his behaviour is that, unlike the Fishers’ comedians who had to grow up quickly, the character of Basil is very immature, taking each offence and obstacle as a personal insult, while overreacting and behaving selfishly as if he were a small child. In psychoanalytic terms, Basil is very much controlled by his id, incapable of selfless thought and obsessed with getting what he wants.⁸⁶ This is demonstrated in the following exchange with Sybil in *The Hotel Inspectors*, which takes place immediately after Basil has been obsequious to Mr Hutchinson (his presumed hotel inspector):

Sybil (sweetly) How are you getting along with your hotel inspector?
Basil ...Fine. Fine.
Sybil He sells spoons.
Basil ...Sorry?
Sybil I listened in on his phone call. He works for a cutlery firm. But he specializes in spoons.
Basil You listened in?
Sybil Yes.
Basil You listened in on a private call to one of our guests?
Sybil That's right, Basil.
Basil ...The little rat! I'll get him for that.
Sybil Now, Basil...
Basil Trying that on with me.
Sybil Trying **what** on?
Basil Pretending he's a hotel inspector... 'Do we hire television sets'... 'fresh peas'... 'ice buckets...
Sybil Basil, it was **your** mistake. You can't...
Basil Now, you let me handle this!
Sybil Basil!!! This whole inspector business was in your own imagination. It's nothing to do with him. There is no excuse for rudeness, do you understand?... **Do you understand?**
Basil Yes!!!
Sybil Good. (she turns and walks away)

*Basil, planning revenge, enters the dining room and stalks the sitting Hutchinson.*⁸⁷

Basil refuses to admit his guilt – shifting it onto the innocent Hutchinson – and is unable to laugh at his own mistake. This creates a heightened level of tension and – as in all the episodes – Basil's inability to release that tension through laughter induces the audience to do it in his stead. The higher the tension, the more the Fishers' comedians had to work at being funny. Similarly, the greater the tension in an episode of *Fawlty Towers* the more potential there is for laughter. However, for this to transpire, Basil must always remain a child who automatically initiates trouble when the mother figure (Sybil) leaves the room.

In conclusion, the reasons and the extent of one's laughter are related directly to the context in which each individual finds him/herself. While laughter theories can provide a useful understanding – and a way of interpreting – the laughter response, they cannot provide a fully adequate and all-encompassing answer to how laughter can be generated. The final chapter will move into the dangerous anarchic elements of Basil's outrageous and vicarious world. The social context of this farcical "world" and its

characters will be analysed in greater detail to discover how both the internal world of farce and the external world of the writers could influence one's interpretation of the printed and performance text.

Chapter 5

This final chapter will explore the *Fawlty Towers* scenario by analysing how the “closed world” of the hotel environment influences character interpretation and dictates – to varying degrees – the style of performance. Section one shall contextualise this “closed world” (and its characters) to better understand how and why it works well within a farcical framework. This will then lead to an informed study of the social, cultural and political influences at work in the series. As a result, my focus will be chiefly on Basil as I demonstrate him to be a xenophobe with strong Anglophilic beliefs and anachronistic Victorian values.¹ The important farcical aspect of character stereotyping will be addressed in more detail – particularly to convey how farce deals with taboo subjects – together with an analysis of how the British social hierarchy is parodied in *Fawlty Towers*. Although this chapter is subdivided under various headings, my approach will be holistic with many of the premises discussed (particularly Basil’s anachronistic Victorian values) remaining constant themes. Finally, the contextual base of the *Fawlty Towers* performance text will never be ignored as each scene analysed will be perceived from both the written and visual/aural material available.

The World of the Sitcom

The world of the sitcom farce must be user-friendly. If made too broad, and the action is impossible to contain, the various situations the characters experience become reduced to nothingness. On the other hand, an environment which is too small quickly results in an author running out of new ideas and becoming repetitious. A hypothetical overly broad sitcom might run as follows: every week there are different characters –

and actors – finding themselves in a vast array of situations in diverse cities and in a variety of time periods. This is positive for the author(s), whose imagination can go off on innumerable tangents and offer the possibility of a very long-running sitcom. However, the stories would become confusing with no plot continuity, and it would be difficult for an audience to form any close attachments to the constantly changing characters. Consequently, an audience not allowed to form an understanding of, and a connection with, the characters, would alienate itself from a series.

A sitcom with a very limited number of characters and a single environment will permit an audience to fully comprehend the situation and its characters. Strong attachments can be made and, through constant association, an audience would be encouraged to feel comfortable with its “extended family”. However, as stated earlier, an audience could become bored and abandon the viewing of the series. As Cleeve points out, there is the danger of the characters becoming so predictable that the audience would arrive at an outcome before the characters do. If a series is to be successful it must have the right balance between the two extremes: be broad enough to accommodate different ideas and a wide range of incidents, while at the same time remain compact and straightforward. With regard to a farcical sitcom, the problem is compounded when attempting to create the balance between unreality and believability. As discussed earlier, farceurs overreact to strife because at a precise moment – in their “world” – it constitutes the worst event of their life. And, outside the context of a farce, that particular overreaction could be interpreted as meaningless and unbelievable. Furthermore, if too much of the “real” world were introduced, it would be impossible to adhere to the “rules” of the farcical world. An audience would find it difficult to accept that, even within the context of the particular series, the events were believable.

The writers of *Fawlty Towers* overcame this problem by setting the series in possibly one of the most popular farcical locales: a hotel. Many farceurs, from Feydeau (for example, *Hotel Paradiso*) to Ray Cooney in such plays as *Two in One*, have used a hotel as a setting either for one act or the whole play. In *Fawlty Towers*, scenes predominantly take place inside – or directly outside – the hotel. The hotel acts as a microcosm, or closed world, which attempts to keep the “real” world out. This allows it to create its own “reality”, and sanctions occurrences which, in any other context, would be implausible. As discussed in chapter three, a very popular sitcom setting is a home with the various characters – often a family or family-like group – interacting with one another in a variety of situations. If a new character appears on the show, it can be argued that there must either be a reason for their presence, or the joke impinges on nobody knowing why they are in the home. For example, a never-before-seen female character could be part of a series’ running joke: the “regular” teenage male character has a new girlfriend in every episode and is never able to remember their names. Or, a plumber may appear in only one episode because of a leaking tap, but return repeatedly because, instead of remedying the problem, he/she continually aggravates the problem with the tap. On the other hand, there is no need to “explain” a character appearing only once in a hotel because of the transient stream of guests which typify the smooth running of a well-working establishment. A hotel can permit a greater selection of individuals from various socio-economic backgrounds than a house, and allow them to interact with each other, thus creating a wider variety of situations. The author now requires little, if any, explanation to populate his/her sitcom with such characters as a psychiatrist one week and a spoon salesman the next. Furthermore, an additional positive outcome of having a large variety of “guest types” is that the main characters’ behavioural scope can potentially become quite broad.

The hotel is a “closed world”. And, in being Basil and Sybil’s own “creation”, its existence – and the existence of the regulars – requires no explanation. Such questions as “Why did Basil and Sybil decide to open a hotel?” or “Why are Basil and Sybil married if they are constantly arguing?” require no answers within the context of the hotel environment. Whether or not Basil and Sybil’s relationship would function in the “real” world is irrelevant – its existence is essential to the world of *Fawlty Towers*. Personality traits are established quickly with little recourse to extended explanations. For example, at the beginning of the first episode the audience learns that Basil hired Manuel “because he’s cheap and keen to learn”² and one could assume that Polly is a “struggling artist” as, when asked by Danny, a guest, if she has sold many of her paintings, she says, “Enough to keep me in waitressing”.³ Therefore, the context of the hotel paradigm acts as an ideal farcical model, as it allows the implausible to be plausible by eliminating the need for lengthy initial explanations.

As a series progresses, its closed world will also produce well-defined characters who behave in a fairly predictable manner, making it easier to envisage how they might react to those who “invade” their territory. Instead of becoming monotonous, such characters assist in establishing an informed reading of the series by having acquired multifaceted personalities. This is noticeable in the character traits of the four regulars who – with the exception of Basil, whose personality was analysed in chapter three – will now be explored in detail.

On one level, Sybil is the stereotypical hen-pecking wife, domineering her eternally suffering husband. However, she cannot be pigeonholed so easily. Basil is no saint and Sybil is obliged to control a husband lacking the skills to cope with both the

running of a hotel, and – according to Cleese – life. Cleese believes that there is a “kind of mutual dependence” between the two. However,

Sybil [is] much, much stronger and more independent than Basil. She could really function perfectly well if Basil buzzed off, or fell under a bus. I don't think Basil could, I think he's much more dependent on Sybil, and that's why he's much more frightened of her than she is of him.

Basil is the basis of Sybil's aggravation and he must be kept on a “short leash” to prevent him from causing any trouble. When she lets that leash out, there are problems. In *Gourmet Night*, she instructs Basil to write the advertisement in the newspaper for their gourmet evening and later regrets it: “I should never have let you write that advert. Fancy putting, ‘No riff-raff’”.⁴ Bright and Ross describe Sybil as a complex binary character who is “both the monster in woman's clothing that Basil believes he has married, and the sociable, capable hotelier her guests encounter”.⁵ Sybil is certainly not perfect. She flirts with some of the male guests, has an irritating laugh and, as has already been demonstrated, can be selfish and lazy. Indeed, there are times when Basil's frustration seems justified, particularly when he is busy, and asks Sybil to take care of some matter and she refuses. Nevertheless, she is much more stable than Basil and does not suffer from his bouts of extreme panic. Sybil may be the cause of many of Basil's worries, but she remains the stabilising influence in the hotel. For example, after being knocked unconscious with a frying pan in *The Germans*, Basil goes to hospital, and, upon awakening, he informs Sybil – who is already in hospital for minor surgery – that Polly cannot cope with the running of the hotel without him. To this statement Sybil serenely replies:

Well, she can't fall over waiters, or get herself jammed under desks, or start burglar alarms, or lock people in burning rooms, or fire fire-extinguishers straight into her own face. But I should think the hotel can do without that sort of coping for a couple of days, what do you think, Basil ... hmmm?⁶

Sybil's dry wit and calm behaviour once again position her as a comedian rather than a farceur. Even Basil's caustic insults such as, “Have a nice day, dear! Don't drive over any mines or anything”⁷ or, “Wanted, kind home for enormous savage rodent. Answers

to the name of Sybil”⁸ do not affect her. The lack of any reaction prevents Sybil from being ridiculed and the laughter is directed at Basil and his spiteful comment.

Unlike Sybil, Manuel is a farceur who uses his body for humorous effect. One could easily pigeonhole Manuel in the stereotypical “stupid foreigner who cannot get anything right” category. However, Manuel only makes a foolish mistake in the final episode, when he permits his pet rat to exercise in the shed. As pointed out by Cleese,

Manuel is one of the sweetest people ... you know he’s always trying to get it right. There’s no way you can blame him except that his English is not quite as good as it might be and that’s ... Basil’s fault ’cause Basil doesn’t pay to give him extra, you know, English lessons as he should.

Therefore, he is continually endeavouring to please, but rarely succeeds at it. Misunderstanding a request, expressing himself badly, or being used as a scapegoat for Basil’s mistakes all guarantee failure. Manuel’s subservience might seem assured because of his role as a waiter, but there are moments when an assertive personality emerges. In *The Hotel Inspectors* there is the following scene:

Basil	Manuel, would you take these cases to room seven, please.
Manuel	<i>Qué?</i>
	<i>Basil takes some cards from below the desk. He shows Manuel a drawing of a suitcase.</i>
Basil	<i>(to Walt, indicating Hutchinson)</i> He thinks Boff is a locale ...
Walt	He thinks what?
Basil	<i>(showing Manuel a vertical arrow)</i> You know, some zone, some province ... in equatorial Torquay <i>(he shows Manuel a number '7'; Manuel holds up a card saying 'OK')</i>
Basil	<i>(to Walt)</i> Manuel will show you to your room ... if you’re lucky. ⁹

Basil considers Manuel a simpleton, having to spell things out to him in the most elementary manner possible. In this scene, the joke is on Basil when Manuel proudly “replies” with his own card. Nonetheless, Basil will not tolerate such disrespect and still insults Manuel’s intelligence. Bright and Ross make an apt point on Manuel’s character:

Manuel acts partly to reveal the true natures of the other principal characters. Sybil responds to him with indifference, Polly with real, if exasperated kindness, and Basil by bullying this vulnerable dependent and thereby exposing his own innate cowardice.¹⁰

Thus, to Sybil, Manuel is Basil's "problem" and she rarely acknowledges his existence. Only in the final episode does she show any compassion when she learns of Manuel's rat.¹¹ In contrast, Basil's wit is as cruel as ever when, after Sybil suggests putting the rat to sleep, he says, "What, him or the rat? We might get a discount if we get 'em both done".¹² Here, as Bright and Ross point out, Manuel acts as the foil to expose the frailty of Basil's character. By being the victim, Manuel emphasises Basil's vicious, bullying nature. His existence offers Basil the ammunition to increase the possibility of physical action. Furthermore, both are exposed to ridicule because of the unreal and preposterous nature of farcical violence.

Polly is arguably a very intriguing character. Her dry, sometimes sarcastic sense of humour and her relative commonsense make her a comedian performing in the chaotic world of farce. As Aronson states: "most sitcoms have a character who has a 'normal' perspective and who is surrounded by crazy people".¹³ The audience may identify with these characters as they act as a counterbalance to the absurdity of their world. Polly is the "straight woman" of the series, further described by Bright and Ross as the "sane centre of life at *Fawlty Towers*",¹⁴ and jokes are rarely aimed at her. Nevertheless, this does not suggest she is detached from the action. Reminiscent of *Colombina* in Commedia, she is quick-witted and resourceful and always willing to help Manuel in his battles with the English language and Basil Fawlty. However, there is one major difference between her and her Commedia predecessor: Polly, as *Colombina*, is not attempting to outsmart Basil (*Pantalone*). She is completely loyal to Basil (even when attempting to protect Manuel), and often goes "behind Sybil's back" to assist Basil in his schemes. For Bright and Ross, "Polly is the middlewoman of the hotel, protecting the other principals from each other's excesses".¹⁵ As discussed in chapter four, Sybil may be Basil's chastising mother-figure, but Polly is his caring parent. She

attempts to shield Basil (and Manuel) from the chaos he creates, while going along with his machinations in an effort to “be there” when he finds himself in any form of strife.

Nevertheless, in spite of it being a “closed” world with its own rules and reality, the outside world continually encroaches on the hotel’s domain. Basil is obsessed with running a highly efficient, “classy” and respectable hotel. In *The Wedding Party*, he walks in on Polly kissing her boyfriend in the lobby and later says to her, “I mean, what sort of place do you think this is, a massage parlour? I mean we are running a nice, respectable, high-class ... I’m sorry, did I say something funny”.¹⁶ Polly’s attempts at stifling her laughter undercut Basil’s statement, implying that *Fawlty Towers* is not quite as perfect as Basil believes it to be. Basil’s ordered world is constantly destabilised, not only by his ineptitude, but also by the guests who enter the hotel world from the “real” one, not knowing the rules of Basil’s microcosm. The result is turmoil and disorder as they disrupt Basil’s “smooth running” environment by doing everything “wrong”. As Basil says, when commenting on the difficult-to-manage Mr Hutchinson in *The Hotel Inspectors*, “I don’t know what it is about this place ... I mean, some of the people we get here ...”¹⁷ From a performance point of view, a hotel’s very nature of being a closed world forced into a public domain sanctions a much wider range of incidents than, say, a home. Ironically, a lack of guests would lead to a better-run hotel, but without them there would be no livelihood. Therefore, as the “closed” world engages with the exterior “real” one, tension is created and there is the immediate possibility for disaster. For example, the various guests have innumerable requests – both reasonable and unreasonable – which must be taken care of quickly and effectively if they are to be kept satisfied. The staff must rush to get things done, and when working at a heightened “farcical” speed, this can lead to potential mistakes, accidents and further chaos. For example, in *Gourmet Night*, Basil’s obsessive attempts at

obtaining a roast duck as quickly as possible result in failure. His haste makes him inattentive and the episode ends with him having to offer his guests a trifle rather than the duck.

A hotel is further conducive to farce in that coincidences can seem less obvious due to the larger range of incidents possible once the doors of the hotel are opened to the outside world. For example, the hotel inspectors arrive at the precise moment when Basil is punishing Mr Hutchinson for his actions, and the psychiatrist, Dr Abbott, constantly appears when Basil is at his most vulnerable. However, an audience is prepared for the arrival of the hotel inspectors because of the constant references made to them and the premise that, this being a hotel, anyone could potentially come through the doors at any time. Likewise, the psychiatrist is a surrogate part of the hotel “world” by staying in one of its rooms, and his appearances can be more coincidental because, unlike Basil, he does not have as predictable a behaviour pattern. Furthermore, with an abundance of doors – particularly with the bedrooms upstairs – a hotel provides many opportunities for the sudden appearance and disappearance of characters. However, unlike stage farces where a set will often remain relatively static – one exception would be Cooney’s *Two into One* where the set revolves to reveal the bedroom and sitting rooms of two hotel suites – the filmic medium can be used in a way which allows the audience to “follow” the cameras and “move” into the various rooms with the characters.

Types and Stereotypes

As discussed previously, to varying degrees, *Fawlty Towers* makes effective use of stereotypes with its regulars. However, this becomes more explicit in the series’ “guest” characters. As the series is set in England, these stereotypes are specifically

“British” and, as will be demonstrated, are usually directly connected to Basil’s Anglophilic sentiments, which are expressed through his xenophobia and “classist” behaviour. To understand this fully, one needs to comprehend certain important features of the Victorian age in the nineteenth century which resonate in the character of Basil Fawlty.

The Victorian period was an age of Empire building and consolidation when Britain attempted to impose its culture and beliefs upon the people it had conquered.¹⁸ According to O’Toole, the Victorians considered themselves to be “at the centre of a great world Empire and liked to think themselves as the essence of modern civilization”,¹⁹ and Ronald Robinson, John Gallagher and Alice Denny assert that they “regarded themselves as the leaders of civilisation, as pioneers of industry and progress”.²⁰ Consequently, the imperialist attitude led to feelings of superiority, with an emphasis placed on the importance of social hierarchy. This is clarified by Steve Attidge’s definition of imperialism:

A political system involving the governing of colonies from an imperial centre, either directly or indirectly, which also has economic aims in the investment and control of markets in those colonies. Imperialism also assumes a mission, a civilizing role, either real or imagined [which justifies the colonisation].²¹

However, this emphasis on social hierarchy was not limited to the colonised countries. Notwithstanding the migration of the new “big money” mercantile class into the aristocracy²² – especially through marriage – Victorian Britain placed a great importance on class distinction. Indeed, A. H. Halsey claims that even today, “a class-ridden society ... is the common judgement on Britain made by social observers, whether delivered as praise or condemnation”.²³ Halsey’s sociological interpretation of the “class-ridden society” is useful for its relevance to my interpretation of *Fawlty Towers* in what follows.

Halsey depicts the Victorian society as comprising three elements – class, status and party:

Classes – for example, professional people or factory workers – are formed socially out of the division of labour. They make up more or less cohesive and socially conscious groups from those occupational groups and their families which share similar work and market situations. Status is formed out of the no less fundamental tendency of human beings to attach positive and negative values to human attributes, and to distribute respect or honour and contempt or derogation accordingly: status groups, for example peers of the realm or vagrants, form as social networks of those who share similar social prestige or life-style. Parties form out of the organized pursuit of social objectives; they are political parties, pressure groups, associations, and unions of those who consciously share planned movement for the acquisition of power. In short, classes belong to the economic, status groups to the social, and parties to the political structure of society.²⁴

However, race is arguably the most problematic because it tends to encapsulate all three elements. Robinson, Gallagher and Denny describe the “authentic Victorian outlook on the world” as being,

Suffused with a vivid sense of superiority and self-righteousness, if with every good intention. Upon the ladder of progress, nations and races seemed to stand higher or lower according to the proven capacity of each for freedom and enterprise: the British at the top, followed a few rungs below by the Americans, and other ‘striving, go ahead’ Anglo-Saxons. The Latin peoples were thought to come next, though far behind. Much lower stood the vast Oriental communities of Asia and north Africa where progress appeared unfortunately to have been crushed for centuries by military despotisms or smothered under passive religions. Lowest of all stood the ‘aborigines’ whom it was thought had never learned enough social discipline to pass from the family and tribe to the making of a state The Victorians aspired to raise them all up the steps of progress which they themselves had climbed. Few doubted the *gesta Dei per Anglos*, however they might disagree about His choice of method Expansion in all its modes seemed not only natural and necessary but inevitable; it was pre-ordained and irreproachably right. It was the spontaneous expression of an inherently dynamic society.²⁵

According to the above quote, the Victorians’ strong nationalistic and Anglophilic sentiments convinced them that their “worldly” sentiments were entirely correct.

With regard to farce, the genre’s ability to attack societal taboos allows it to draw attention to, and expose, those stereotypes which in the “real” world might be masked by a thin veneer of political correctness. Thus, Basil’s inappropriate treatment of others is a reflection of – and on – the behaviour system of his Victorian forebears. His struggle to uphold his personal standards and values – while measuring each individual who enters his hotel against them – makes him their direct descendent. While Halsey further suggests that the “British twentieth-century history is the history

of the decay of the values and status system of the Victorian period”,²⁶ these have not been entirely eliminated and make themselves evident in such late-twentieth-century sitcom characters as Basil Fawlty. As will be explored later in the chapter, Basil is an anachronism, an individual who lives out of his time by clinging onto an outdated value system.

Racial stereotypes are a recurrent theme in *Fawlty Towers*. For example, the audience is first made aware of the Irish builder O’Reilly in *A Touch of Class* when Basil answers the phone and says,

Hello?... Ah, yes, Mr O’Reilly, well it’s perfectly simple. When I asked you to build me a wall I was rather hoping that instead of just dumping the bricks in a pile you might have found time to cement them together...you know, one on top of another, in the traditional fashion.²⁷

Then, in *The Builders*, the men working for O’Reilly demonstrate the ineptitude of his firm by building a door where there should not be one and closing off the wrong one. Expectations now run high to discover what O’Reilly is really like. Finally, he makes an appearance, and is “*nearly at work on the dining-room door*”.²⁸ The stereotype of the dim-witted Irishman is reinforced when Sybil discovers the mess and states that O’Reilly is “**shoddy**, he doesn’t care, he’s a **liar**, he’s incompetent, he’s **lazy**, he’s nothing but a **half-witted thick Irish joke!!!**”²⁹ Later,

She wallops him [with an umbrella]. He collapses under a flurry of blows, emitting a charming gentle Irish cry of distress. She lowers the umbrella and stands over him.

Sybil O’Reilly, I have seen more intelligent creatures than you lying on their backs at the bottom of ponds. I have seen better organized creatures than you running round farmyards with their heads cut off.³⁰

O’Reilly’s beating and subsequent whimpering – coupled with Sybil standing over him in triumph – turns the man into a pathetic powerless figure, castigated for the wrongs done to the hotel. This serves to diminish him in the eyes of the audience, with laughter directed at his plight despite the suffering caused by Sybil’s attack. It is impossible to treat him seriously as he is reduced to the “Irish joke” described earlier. (In O’Reilly’s

defence, it could be argued that the mess up was not entirely his fault because Manuel did not wake up Polly so she could make sure that the work was carried out correctly.) Then, once the renovations on the hotel are completed to Basil's specifications, and it appears that O'Reilly has redeemed himself, it is revealed that he used the wrong material and the wall could collapse. This episode is particularly problematic in that it strengthens the stereotype of the incompetent, stupid Irishman. However, one should be careful in using one example to define a whole series as being anti-foreigner. Rather, such incidents make a point about Basil's ongoing xenophobia, particularly if one construes O'Reilly to be a form of "cheap Irish labour". It is made clear in the first two episodes that Basil has hired O'Reilly on numerous occasions because of his economical rates. Sybil even calls him a "cut-price cock-up artist".³¹ This becomes more of a reflection on Basil's stinginess and desire to cut corners, rather than a suggestion that all Irish are as inept as O'Reilly. This is further backed by the reason he hired Manuel: "Because he's cheap and keen to learn".³²

Basil may be an Anglophile – and a xenophobe – but he is not averse to saving money in any way he can by having foreigners "lower down" on the hierarchical scale work for him. An extreme interpretation of the episode would be that, through a Victorian ethos, Basil uses "foreign labour" which, once subjugated, will work for a low fee. As suggested by Sybil, "You get what you pay for",³³ and O'Reilly could be perceived as the "native" whose resentment at being colonised leads to poor workmanship. However, this interpretation is only feasible on the assumption that Sybil's statement implies that if the "natives" had been paid properly their work would be of a higher standard.³⁴ A better interpretation involves focusing on the end of the episode where, even after being proven wrong, Basil forces O'Reilly to complete the work. After his frightening panic attack when first discovering the state of his lobby –

and Sybil's violent reaction – it could be supposed that Basil would never again go against his wife's wishes. Nevertheless, true to his farcical personality, Basil's obsessiveness drives him to force O'Reilly to continue working because of his inability to admit defeat. As a pseudo-Victorian, Basil's arrogance forbids him from acknowledging his mistakes, because it would show weakness of character. This is compounded in the example from *The Wedding Party* outlined in chapter three when Basil, instead of apologising to the Lloyds for telling them to leave, uses Sybil as a scapegoat. The incident pertinent to this argument takes place just before he "apologises":

Sybil	<i>(placidly)</i> Go and tell them they can stay.
Basil	... Why don't you go and tell them?
Sybil	<i>I didn't tell them to go.</i>
Basil	No, no, I suppose it's all my fault, isn't it?
Sybil	<i>(firmly)</i> Go and tell them! ... Now!
Basil	No, I won't.
Sybil	You will.
Basil	No, no I won't.
Sybil	<i>(standing up)</i> Oh yes you will.
Basil	Oh yes I will. Right! That's right – leave it to me! Let me get you out of it. That's what I'm good for, isn't it? Basil Fawlty Limited. Other people's messes cleared up. By appointment to my wife Sybil ... I mean, what am I going to say?!
Sybil	Tell them you made a mistake.
Basil	Oh, brilliant. Is that what made Britain great? 'I'm so sorry I made a mistake.' What have you got for a brain – sponge cake? ³⁵

Too embarrassed to admit to having made a mistake, Basil's behaviour, coupled with his statement on Britain, implies that his country would never stoop to apologise for its mistakes. He makes it clear to Sybil that even such a suggestion would be completely preposterous, as any show of weakness would decrease its "greatness". From a Victorian standpoint, an admission of error on Britain's part would damage its imperialistic position, suggesting that it could also be wrong in other areas – including the conviction of having the right to colonise "lesser" nations. (As pointed out earlier, by believing that their actions were "correct", the Victorians could justify all they did.) Similarly, earlier in the episode, Basil believes he is justified in telling the Lloyds to

leave the hotel because he is under the misconception that they are behaving in an immoral – and therefore “un-British” – manner.

In *Gourmet Night* Basil has hired Kurt, a new chef, whom Sybil describes as “marvellous”.³⁶ Later, while at dinner with their chef friend André – who recommended Kurt – she says, “This [meal] is wonderful He’s almost as good as you are André. Oh!! It’s absolutely **divine**”.³⁷ These exchanges are important in order that the characters (and audience) develop exceptionally high expectations for the forthcoming gourmet night. The event becomes the equivalent of a high status individual who is at risk of slipping very badly – and with great embarrassment – on a metaphorical banana peel. The episode is provided with two “banana peels”: Manuel and alcohol. Kurt is in love with Manuel, and when this love is not reciprocated he starts to drink wine. Both “banana peels” have been “on stage” the whole time. Previously Kurt refuses a glass of wine from Polly saying that he enjoys it “Too much”, and won’t drink while he’s working.³⁸ Later, there is an exchange between André and Kurt which suggests that Kurt’s employment at the hotel represents André giving Kurt a second chance. The audience is primed to expect something to go wrong, and when it does Basil behaves in a predictable manner. Instead of sympathising with Kurt’s plight he says,

Basil I knew I should never have hired a Frenchman.
Polly	He’s Greek, Mr Fawlty.
Basil	Greek?
Polly	Of course.
Basil	Well, that’s even worse. I mean, they invented it. ³⁹

Basil only cares about his gourmet night, and judging by his earlier over-the-top reaction to Kurt’s intoxicated condition he realises just how potentially catastrophic the “fall” can be on his culinary evening. True to character, Basil lashes out and, instead of blaming Kurt personally, his xenophobia leads him to blame an entire nation. By getting Kurt’s nationality incorrect, this further strengthens the argument of Basil’s

racist leanings through simplistic generalisations – the implication being that if he had hired an English chef this would never have happened. Kurt and Manuel can be likened to the “natives” of a far-off British colony who – from a Victorian point of view – must be guided away from their brutal ways to evolve into a “proper” (British) civilisation. Normally, Basil, as the wise English Governor, holds the hands of his “natives” so that, like children, they will grow into an image of their “betters”. In turning his back on them for a short time, they have reverted to their uncouth and uncivilised behaviour, thus reinforcing the Victorian belief that colonisation was acceptable – and necessary.

Basil’s snide reference to the Greeks having “invented it” refers to two aspects of Ancient Greek society: alcohol and homosexuality. The Ancient Greeks worshiped Dionysus, god of wine and fertility, and as stated by David Taylor, a section of Dionysus’ female worshippers, known as the *Bacchantes* or *Maenads*, would leave their homes, go into the mountains to take part in “frenzied worship of their god”.⁴⁰ (In other words they would become intoxicated.) This implies that for the Ancient Greeks, drunkenness – particularly within the context of Dionysian worship – was completely acceptable. Next, as pointed out by Oswyn Murray, in early Greek society, “the Greek conception of romantic love was homosexual”.⁴¹ Basil blames the Ancient Greek culture of celebrating and promoting both drunkenness and homosexuality for the catastrophe which has engulfed his hotel: if Kurt had not fallen in love with Manuel and been rejected he would not be drunk and the gourmet night would be a success. To Basil, Kurt is entirely governed by uncontrollable, primitive urges and, when attempting to remove the half-drunk bottle of wine from Kurt’s hands, he resorts to stereotypically British calm, clear logic. This foolish attempt fails, as Kurt is too intoxicated to listen to reason and the laughter is directed mainly at Basil’s futile efforts, which result in Kurt

falling back in a stupor. With Kurt out cold, and numb to Basil's attempts at strangulation, Basil quickly shifts the blame onto Manuel:

Manuel	<i>(from behind the dining-room doors)</i> Now listen to me Kurty! I come in here but no cuddle. You hear me? <i>No cuddle.</i>
Basil	<i>(leaves off strangling Kurt, grabs Manuel and drags him in)</i> Look what you've done!
Manuel	<i>(recoiling)</i> Dead?!
Basil	To the world.
Polly	He's only drunk, Manuel.
Basil	<i>(to Manuel)</i> This is your fault.
Manuel	<i>Qué?</i>
Basil	You only had to be civil with him.
Manuel	Seville?
Basil	<i>Nice!</i>
Manuel	You no understand – is not enough. He want kiss me.
Basil	Oh, what's one little kiss! ... ⁴²

Such a stressful situation brings out the worst in Basil who cares nothing for Manuel's sensitivities or Kurt's plight. At the centre of his own "Empire", Basil's "natives" have failed him. However, it is his completely egocentric behaviour which prevents Basil from being a little more attentive to the needs and behaviour of his staff. Basil has the power but not the sense of responsibility or the compassion to deal with others effectively.

A similar incidence where Basil believes a "continental" to be possessed by uncontrollable urges occurs in *The Wedding Party*. Mrs Peignoir flirts innocently with Basil throughout the episode. However, once Sybil is out of the hotel, Basil starts to panic, believing that Mrs Peignoir is making serious advances on him. At the end of the episode Sybil returns and Basil says to her, while under the misconception that she is Mrs Peignoir: "Try to control yourself. Where do you think you are? Paris? Shut up, will you, you silly great tart! Go **away**".⁴³ In this scene, Basil's misunderstanding of the situation is what generates the humour. His fearful denunciations of the innocent Mrs Peignoir⁴⁴ are groundless. She has no "French urges" and it is his uncontrolled imagination which "creates" the non-existent scenario.⁴⁵

When dealing with an American, Basil's hypocrisy and elitist thinking are destabilised by an attack on his supposed position as "master of the house". *Waldorf Salad* begins with the hotel staff frantically serving dinner to a group of dissatisfied guests who either don't voice their complaints or, if they do, are contradicted and seen as troublemakers. An exchange, which deserves exploration, goes as follows:

Mr Arrad	<i>(to Basil)</i> Excuse me.
Basil	Yes.
Mr Arrad	Look, we've been waiting here for about half an hour now, I mean we gave the waiter our order...
Basil	Oh, him. He's hopeless, isn't he.
Mr Arrad	Yes, well, I don't wish to complain, but when he finally does bring something, he's got it wrong.
Basil	You think I don't know? I mean, you only have to eat here. We have to live with it. I had to pay his fare all the way from Barcelona. But we can't get the staff, you see. It's a nightmare. <i>(he moves off feeling better)</i>
Mrs Arrad	<i>(to her husband)</i> You were supposed to be complaining to him . ⁴⁶

Basil is yet again the great Empire builder, this time confiding in those of "his kind" and assuming that they will sympathise with the difficulties caused by a foreigner unschooled in the mores of an enlightened society. Basil's response implies that there would be no problem if Manuel were English. As owner, Basil is ultimately accountable for the standards of the hotel, however, his Anglophilic sentiments prevent him from accepting his responsibility. Basil's next attempt to gain support for his Anglophilic and racist beliefs backfires with the arrival of Mr and Mrs Hamilton:

Mr Hamilton has come in. He is aggressively American. He is also very wet.

Mr Hamilton	What a drive, eh? Everything on the wrong side of the road – and the weather, what do you get for living in a climate like this, green stamps? It's terrible.
Basil	<i>(to Mrs Hamilton)</i> I'm sorry about this.
Mr Hamilton	Took five hours from London...Couldn't find the freeway. Had to take a little back street called the M5.
Basil	Well, I'm sorry it wasn't wide enough for you. A lot of the English cars have steering wheels.
Mr Hamilton	They do, do they? You wouldn't think there was room for them inside.
Basil	<i>(quietly, to Mrs Hamilton)</i> See what I mean?
Mrs Hamilton	What?
Basil	<i>(to himself)</i> Rub-bish. <i>(flicks a glance at Mr Hamilton and subtly holds his nose)</i>
Mrs Hamilton	May I introduce my husband? ⁴⁷

Basil's hypocrisy comes out clearly in this exchange. While he casually makes disparaging remarks about another culture, he cannot tolerate any criticism of his own.

Nevertheless, the forceful Mr Hamilton – who demands to be treated in a fitting manner – then proceeds to turn Basil’s world upside-down. One could argue that Mr Hamilton is quite rude and overly aggressive. However, it is only by losing his temper that he is able to keep Basil behaving as a proper hotelier, and the episode concludes with the Hamiltons being wholly dissatisfied with Basil’s behaviour. Basil then asks the other guests if they are satisfied with the hotel’s standards and – having received some hesitant assent – says,

You see ... satisfied customers! Of course if this little hotel is not to your taste, then you are free to say so, that is your privilege. And I shall of course refund your money. (*he looks for the £20; unseen by him, Mr Johnstone comes up and stands behind him*) I know how important it is to you Americans. But you must remember (*he hands over the money*) that here in Britain there are things that we value more, things that perhaps in America you’ve rather forgotten, but which here in Britain are far, far more important ...⁴⁸

This statement shows Basil at his most Anglophilic, where he uses a moralistic sermon in an attempt to exculpate himself for his sub-standard service. However, at this point Mr Johnstone informs Basil that he (Mr Johnstone) is not happy with how the hotel is run, resulting in a stream of complaints from other disgruntled guests. In typical farcical manner Basil is backed into a corner, refuses to accept blame for his badly run hotel and says,

This is typical, absolutely typical ... of the kind of ... (*shouting*) ARSE I have to put up with from you people. You ponce in here expecting to be waited on hand and foot, well, I’m trying to run a hotel here. Have you any idea of how much there is to do? Do you ever think of that? Of course not, you’re all too busy sticking your noses into every corner, poking around for things to complain about, aren’t you. Well, let me tell you something – this is exactly how Nazi Germany started, you know. A lot of layabouts with nothing better to do than to cause trouble. Well I’ve had fifteen years of pandering to please the likes of you and I’ve had enough. I’ve had it. Come on, pack your bags and get out!⁴⁹

With this speech Basil moves into the realm of the illogical. The Victorians used the theories of social evolution to “prove” that their Empire was more “evolved” than that of other countries.⁵⁰ This belief gave them another justification to take over whomever they wanted in order to assist other cultures in bettering themselves by becoming a copy of the coloniser’s more “correct” society. Basil uses superficially rational language to argue the totally irrational point, that others are responsible for his failings. As argued

earlier, Basil considers his hotel to be a private domain where his word is law. For him, the guests demanding that they be able to enjoy the services they have paid for is an unreasonable request. Using an amazing leap of imagination, Basil outrageously attempts to annul his shortcomings by likening his guests' "bad" behaviour to the events which led to the formation of Nazi Germany. By comparing them to another race, Basil is effectively labelling their conduct as anti-British because such "ominous" behaviour is only a possibility in other countries.

Earlier in the episode, Hamilton instructs Basil on how to be a good manager, telling him to "bust his [the cook's] ass"⁵¹ in order to get things done correctly in the kitchen. It takes a while for Basil to realise that Hamilton is pronouncing "arse" with an American accent and saying "ass". Once again, Basil – as the pseudo-Victorian – shouts the word in order that he may correct Mr Hamilton's "obvious" mispronunciation. Ironically, Mr Hamilton comes from a country which was once a British colony, and Basil's behaviour could be viewed as that of a parent castigating a prodigal child who should never have left the safety of the Commonwealth. However, Basil is completely at fault, and his reaction is one of spite and vengeance.

The intertwining of Basil's xenophobic and Anglophilic sentiments are best revealed in his attitude towards Germany, a country mentioned three times in *Fawlty Towers*. It is alluded to in two episodes, *Waldorf Salad* (as shown above) and *Basil the Rat*, and features most predominantly in *The Germans*. The focus on this nation draws attention to the strongest case for a parody of Basil's Anglophilic behaviour, while demonstrating him to be a creature of the past. Germany and England were on opposing sides in both World Wars which resulted in a considerable amount of animosity developing between the two countries. Furthermore, in order to spur their sides on to

victory, nationalistic – and very disparaging – rhetoric and propaganda abounded in both countries. For a great part of *The Germans*, the main characters discuss the imminent arrival of their German guests who only make an appearance in the second half of the episode. However, their constant foreshadowing exposes the characters' attitudes towards their prospective guests, and implies that something important will take place later. The most striking example involves the subsequent exchange between Polly, Basil and the Major:

Basil	<i>(to Polly)</i> What are you looking for?
Polly	My German phrase book.
Basil	<i>(to the Major)</i> We've got some Germans arriving tomorrow morning, Major, so Polly's brushing up another one of her languages.
The Major	Germans! Coming here?
Basil	Just a couple of days, Major.
The Major	... I don't care much for Germans ...
Basil	I know what you mean but ...
The Major	Bunch of Krauts, that's what they are, all of 'em. Bad eggs!
Basil	Yes, well, forgive and forget, Major...God knows how, the bastards. Still, I'd better put the moose up.
The Major	You've got to love 'em, though, I suppose, haven't you?
Basil	... Germans?
The Major	No, no – women! Hate Germans ... love women.
Polly	<i>(rising from behind the desk)</i> What about German women?
The Major	Good card players ... but mind, I wouldn't give them the time of day ... <i>(he wanders off, mumbling)</i>
Polly	<i>(showing Basil her phrase book)</i> Found it.
Basil	I don't know what you're bothering with that for.
Polly	Well, they said some of them don't speak English.
Basil	Well, that's their problem, isn't it. ⁵²

A comradely feeling develops between Basil and the Major, as the Germans are set up as the “other”, with the two men becoming malicious, and making generalisations regarding the German people. Portraying the Major as a retired military man still using his rank, and much older than Basil, gives one a sense of living in the past – thus echoing Basil's anachronistic point of view. The Major's age suggests that he fought in at least one of the world wars, making his dislike of the Germans very personal. However, his senility (which conforms to another stereotype – the eccentric retired military gentleman) tinges everything he says with a touch of folly, implying that his opinions of the Germans are as groundless as those he has on other subjects. To a certain extent, the Major lives in his own reality where the beliefs and prejudices of the

past are still active. The generalities become even more outrageous when the Major suggests that all German women are good card players. The Major tries to find some good in the German character but gives up and would not give them the “time of day” because – to him – this would be wrong. Regarding Basil and the episode as a whole, Cleese makes the following statement:

The point that I was trying to make, and this is absolutely true, was that people like Basil are utterly stuck in the past So the whole point of it was about these extraordinary attitudes of people who are still hanging onto the Second World War. If they were in the war, if they saw bad things then of course they’ve got to hang onto it, rather as the Japanese do, I mean the Japanese prisoners of war do. I’ve enormous sympathy for them. I don’t know how you let go of things ... you’ve seen friends beheaded and stuff like that. But the fact is, the rest of us don’t have to go with that, the rest of us could let it go.

Therefore, according to Cleese, although the Major might be excused because of his senility and supposed direct experience in warfare, Basil has inherited his views, having only been a child during World War II. Basil’s fundamental opinion on Germans emerges in *Basil the Rat* where he believes the Major, who is talking about “vermin”, to be referring to “Germans”. He then says, “Still, forgive and forget, eh, Major Well, pretend we do”.⁵³

When the Germans arrive, Basil has suffered a hard hit on the head, ended up in hospital and returned to the hotel before being discharged. As suggested by Bermel, farcical characters might be put under some sort of spell to rob them of their faculties.⁵⁴ With Basil, the spell is concussion and the “magic wand” is a frying pan. Basil is out of his mind, thus allowing the writers to take him to a level of bluntness and thoughtlessness which he would never have achieved if he had been in total control of his faculties. His true feelings for the Germans emerge after he repeatedly tells Polly not to mention the war, while constantly referring to it himself:

2nd German	Will you stop talking about the war?
Basil	Me? You started it!
2nd German	We did not start it.
Basil	Yes you did, you invaded Poland. ⁵⁵

The tension increases until Basil angrily exclaims, “**Who won the bloody war, anyway?**”⁵⁶ Basil is once more a Victorian, living in the past and measuring worth through victory over other cultures. He eventually blames a group of people for something their forebears may have done. This is patriotism taken to extremes and it is a telling point that the Germans are not given names. This emphasises the attitude of not seeing them as individuals with human feelings and values but simply as the “other” nation or, within the context of a war, the anti-nation. As Cleese states:

If you looked at the Germans, all the people that he was interacting with are much...far too young to have had anything to do with the Second World War and therefore it was much more about the fact that Basil was stuck in the past than it was trying to make fun of the Germans. But it wasn't trying to make fun of the Germans at all because they were actually behaving very reasonably all through and I think only one of them gets a bit angry at the end and that's after Basil's made his wife cry.

Therefore, the parody is directed at Basil and those of similar mind. As Basil was acting in an absurd manner because of his concussion, it can be argued that all those who believe as he does are equally absurd. The final scene compounds this:

The doctor comes in with a hypodermic needle ready

Doctor	Mr Fawlty, you'll be all right – come with me.
Basil	Fine.

Suddenly Basil dashes off to the kitchen, out across into the lobby and into the office. He spots the doctor in pursuit and leaves by the other door into the reception. He meets Manuel under the Moose's head and thumps him firmly on the head. Manuel sinks to his knees. The moose's head falls off the wall; Basil is knocked cold. The moose's head lands on Manuel. The Major, entering from the bar, is intrigued.

Manuel	<i>(speaking through the moose's nose)</i> Ooooooh, he hit me on the head ...
The Major	<i>(slapping the moose's nose)</i> No, you hit him on the head. You naughty moose!
2nd German	<i>(sadly)</i> However did they win? ⁵⁷

After all that extremely physical farcical action, the second German's statement is most apt in summing up this section on Anglophilia. In his eyes, English behaviour (running around a hotel being chased by a man with a syringe) is completely absurd. Basil's approach to the “other” becomes not only hypocritical but also unjust, as he is the one who originally brought up the subject of the war in an offensive manner, behaved rudely and finally appears to have completely lost his wits.

In conclusion, it must be noted that there is one aspect of Basil's xenophobic personality which is revealed only briefly in *The Germans*: his attitude towards individuals of African descent – specifically Sybil's doctor. Basil appears very uncomfortable around Sybil's doctor (who has African ancestry), being almost afraid to go near him. His stepping away from the doctor at their first meeting illustrates Basil's racial discrimination quite acutely. Nevertheless, this occurs only in passing – and Basil's attitude towards the doctor is quite deferential. While prejudices against “continentals” and the Irish are parodied, by entering into any parody of overt racism towards an Afro-Caribbean British subject, or an African, could be considered too sensitive in 1970s Britain in the context of the rise of the National Front, and skinhead attacks on ethnic minorities.⁵⁸ This would push a taboo subject over the grotesque line and make the topic distasteful.

Social Hierarchy

One prominent facet of Basil's character connected to his Anglophilic sentiments involves his socio-hierarchical beliefs. The hotel setting is once again highly conducive in bringing this aspect of his character into prominence because of the diverse assortment of guests. Basil tends to judge people very quickly and position them in a socio-hierarchical scale. Furthermore, his behaviour changes drastically depending upon which “class” he deems a particular individual to belong. Sybil encapsulates Basil's personality in *The Psychiatrist*, with the claim that “you never get it right, do you. You're either crawling all over them licking their boots, or spitting poison at them like some benzedrine puff-adder”.⁵⁹ His preoccupation with class emerges in the first episode, *A Touch of Class*, where he places an advertisement in a

very expensive magazine in order to attract a “better class of person”.⁶⁰ When Sybil asks him why, he answers:

Basil	Well, we’re losing tone .
Sybil	We’re making money.
Basil	Yes, yes...
Sybil	Just.
Basil	Yes, but now we can try to build up a higher class of clientele!...Turn away some of the riff-raff.
Sybil	So long as they pay their bills, Basil. ⁶¹

Sybil reminds Basil that a hotel’s purpose is to provide a service in exchange of a fee. However, Basil’s class prejudices are so acute that they hinder his ability to carry out this function adequately. *A Touch of Class* acts as a metaphor for the stereotypical British society, and it could be concluded that ability and decency come second to one’s social position. As Halsey remarks, Britain is “a country where the tiniest detail of manner or style was once a symbol sufficient to place a person immediately in a national and unitary hierarchy of prestige”.⁶² For example, Basil is extremely impolite to Melbury until the latter mentions that he is a Lord. Basil then ignores all the other customers and fawns on Melbury outrageously, even attempting to make himself look “small” by bending over and behaving in a servile manner.

For Basil, what makes Melbury special is his “breeding”, which is made “evident” in both his (Melbury’s) speech and behaviour, such as ordering an aristocratic sherry rather than a drink which might be considered “common”. In contrast, when Danny Brown makes his first appearance in the same episode, he is described as a “*very non-aristocratic-looking cockney*” (with an extremely common name) and, upon seeing him, Basil “*stands appalled*”.⁶³ Basil then behaves very rudely, even telling Danny that there are no rooms left, not wanting so “uncouth” an individual in his hotel. Acting as a parody of a certain stereotypical English behaviour, the way Danny dresses, speaks and behaves automatically place him into a very low societal niche. Then, Basil’s dislike

for him increases when, after introducing Danny to Manuel saying, “he’s from Barcelona ... in Spain”,⁶⁴ (implying that Danny is not educated enough to know the location of Barcelona) he discovers that Danny not only owns a white sports car but can also speak fluent Spanish – a language Basil pretends to know. This makes Basil look foolish, particularly in view of having stated earlier that he is able to speak “Classical Spanish”, while Manuel speaks a “strange dialect”.⁶⁵ To the class-conscious Basil, a man so low on the hierarchical scale should not be permitted to own an expensive car, let alone be intelligent enough to speak a foreign language. Ironically, at the end of the episode it is Danny – an undercover police officer – who stops Melbury from swindling Basil out of his money. Having his superficial judgement of character proven wrong stresses the inadequacy of Basil’s behaviour. This is compounded at the end of the episode when Basil’s presumption that a person of higher status is “better” than others is offset by the ill-mannered behaviour of the two “real” aristocrats. In passing, it is significant to note that Basil’s hierarchical prejudices also encompass occupational status, as shown in *The Kipper and the Corpse*:

Sybil	Would you make some ham sandwiches, please.
Basil	Look, I’m trying ...
Sybil	For Dr Price. (<i>the phone rings in the lobby</i>)
Basil	Oh ... of course. Yes, one moment, Doctor. ⁶⁶

When Basil discovers the sandwiches are for a guest with a medical degree, he alters his behaviour accordingly, and “inserts” himself into his hierarchical position.

Nevertheless, as suggested in the scene where Basil is explaining to Sybil why he inserted an advertisement in an “upper class” magazine, Basil is frequently attempting to push his own hierarchical boundaries. He prides himself on being an aesthete, and through his pompous, opinionated behaviour, endeavours to portray himself as a cultured and intelligent individual. In *A Touch of Class* Sybil is attempting

to have Basil hang a picture, which he has been putting off for a week, and there is the following exchange:

Returning to the office he [Basil] sits down, and switches on a cassette of Brahms. He settles back in rapture, but hears Sybil coming and rushes back to the picture in the lobby.

Basil	Hallo dear...just doing the picture.
Sybil	Don't forget the menu.
Basil	... I beg your pardon?
Sybil	Don't forget the menu.
Basil	I thought you said you wanted...Right! (<i>puts the picture down</i>) I'll do the menu.
Sybil	You could have had them both done by now if you hadn't spent the whole morning skulking in there listening to that racket. (<i>goes out</i>)
Basil	Racket? That's Brahms ! Brahms' Third Racket!! ... (<i>to himself</i>) The whole morning! ... I had two bars. ⁶⁷

By presenting himself as a sophisticated individual – in *The Wedding Party* he listens to Chopin – Basil is outraged by anyone who cannot appreciate (or understand) the arts to the same degree he does.⁶⁸ While for Sybil, the music of Brahms is a “racket”, for Basil the appreciation of the “higher things” – such as classical music, foreign languages, fine wines, and so forth – ties in with his anachronistic Victorian value-system. However, despite Basil's affectations, reality is quite different. For example, in a scene from *The Hotel Inspectors* Basil has a conversation with Mr Walt regarding the appreciation of wine. Notwithstanding his best efforts, throughout the discussion Basil displays his very limited knowledge on the subject:

Walt	Well, [the wine has] lots of body.
Basil	(<i>picking up the bottle and expertly gauging its weight</i>) Quite right. It's always a pleasure to find someone who appreciates the boudoir of the grape. I'm afraid most of the people we get in here don't know a Bordeaux from a claret.
Walt	... A Bordeaux is a claret. ⁶⁹

In typical “Basil” fashion – lacking a scapegoat – he then makes a very bad attempt at masking his mistake. Ultimately, Basil is a fraud who endorses a class system with which he is in constant battle. From an uncomplicated point of view, Basil is polite to those whom he considers “above” him on the hierarchical scale, and discourteous to those he deems as being “low” members of society. However, his attempts at using the upper class to add “tone” to his hotel and help himself rise above his station – coupled

with his affectations at “high” culture – suggest that he is not content with his own position in society, and wishes to better himself.

Basil is a complex and highly problematic character. He could be interpreted as a very selfish – and unstable – human being whose qualities are responsible for his incessant misfortune. Essentially, Basil is often reduced to being like an infant child who will throw a tantrum whenever he does not get his own way. And, his lashing out at innocent victims – such as Manuel – or attempting to cover his mistakes with implausible lies, results in Sybil (the mature, strict mother figure) chastising “her” misbehaving child. On the other hand, Basil is a farcical character and some viewers may empathise with him, because his antics instigate laughter. Furthermore, it can be argued that there are times when Basil’s brutal honesty could be quite refreshing for members of a viewing audience. Unless he is fawning over a guest, Basil allows himself to be ruled by his emotions. If he dislikes someone he shows it; if he is having a bad day, he will snap at a guest; and if he wants to lash out at Manuel, he does. As broached in chapter four, from a psychoanalytic point of view, in his private “world” Basil is free from society’s constraints, and he is at liberty to battle the obstacles placed in his way – these could include the “invasion” of guests who refuse to follow his rules and the presence of a domineering wife – with any method he chooses. Nonetheless, if Basil is perceived in a positive light when certain strong, and widely held, beliefs and prejudices are being parodied, there is the danger that instead of their being critiqued, the parody reinforces them. However, this would only occur if *Fawlty Towers*’ contextual basis in farce were to be ignored. Throughout the thesis, attention has been drawn to the role of the farceur and, consequently, whom the audience’s laughter would be directed at. In *Fawlty Towers* Basil is clearly a farceur, with most laughter being directed at his inadequacies as a human being and incompetence as an hotelier. It is

Basil who suffers primarily in each episode and goes through the most outrageous levels of stress while rushing around madly in an attempt to restore order. Therefore, by performing farcical actions, his opinions – as an extension of his behaviour – are also farcical. Although the opinions expressed by such characters as Basil and the Major might be seen by some in a positive light, from a farcical context (where the laughter is directed at them rather than with them), *Fawlty Towers* acts as a criticism of prejudices held by those characters – and potentially some members of the audience.

Conclusion

Farce is a complex “genre” with an intricate number of characteristics which can be manifested in a variety of forms. While retaining certain core qualities which make it a distinctive and recognisable genre, its very complexity makes it difficult to sustain the argument that it is inferior to other dramatic forms.

In chapter one, farce was established as a separate and distinct genre; its overt physicality and invocations of the “unreal” nature being key features which aid in its identification. The length and necessarily wide-ranging aspects of the first chapter – it covers many theories, and plays from various time-periods – confirm farce’s standing as a unique dramatic form. While chapter one highlighted the complex nature of farce, chapter two emphasised its richness. After the section on theatrical hierarchy, which argued against the belief that farce is a substandard genre, it was argued that its relationship to Commedia and Carnival reveals characteristics which might have gone unnoticed in negative and reductive depictions of the genre. Specifically, the emphasis placed on the physicality of farce shows it to be a dynamic theatrical form, with the written text constituting only one of the aspects which allow it to “come to life” on stage. Chapter three’s analysis of *Fawlty Towers* – with its more extended account of how farce functions in a specific dramatic text – demonstrated how farce’s eclectic styles use the techniques of the past in a modern setting.

Finally, chapters four and five moved away from the direct examination of the farcical techniques in order to further explore farce’s effects. It was demonstrated that laughter is not a trivial issue, but rather a complex entity with a great possibility for analysis. This counters the belief that farce’s inferiority is partly due to the importance

it places on instigating spectator laughter. A farcical performance consists of both what is taking place on stage and off. Audience enthusiasm gives farce its energy, and as audience laughter encourages the actors to better their performances, this in turn invited the audience to enter more fully into the farcical “world”. (This circuit is also used in the televisual medium by having a studio audience while filming a sitcom episode.) The final chapter moves into a more “literary” analysis of *Fawlty Towers*, thereby demonstrating that it is possible to examine farce in such a way. Nevertheless, I never ignored the all-encompassing – and rich – performance text which is a vital element in the study of *Fawlty Towers*, and farce in general.

This thesis has had a very broad scope covering both obvious and obscure elements of farce, but never removing it from its performance context. Each chapter could be expanded much further and I have in no way exhausted the subject matter. For example, chapter five could be perceived as an introduction to a social analysis of *Fawlty Towers*. However, as my intention was to confirm the complexities attainable by farce, I decided to cover as many themes as possible and not limit myself to only one aspect of the genre. Nonetheless, I do not consider my thesis to be superficial or, in any way, simplistic. And, I believe to have fully accomplished the objective outlined in the introduction: “to demonstrate – through exposition – that farce is neither unsophisticated nor unrefined, but, rather, a complex and multi-faceted genre in its own right with distinct characteristics, and eminently worthy of analysis”.

Notes

Introduction

- ¹ Arthur Delbridge, editor in chief, *The Macquarie Dictionary, second edition* (New South Wales: The Macquarie Library Pty Ltd, 1991), p. 629.
- ² Joyce M. Hawkins and Robert Allen, eds., *The Oxford Encyclopedic English Dictionary* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1991), p. 511.
- ³ Bruce Moore, ed., *The Australian Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: University Press, 1999), p. 468.
- ⁴ John Sinclair, editor in chief, *BBC English Dictionary* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), p. 413.
- ⁵ J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner ed., *The Oxford English Dictionary, volume v: dvandva – follies, second edition* (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1989), p. 727.
- ⁶ J. M. Sinclair, general consultant, *Collins Softback English Dictionary*, third edition (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), p. 549.
- ⁷ Garry Berman, *Best of the Britcoms: From Fawlty Towers to Absolutely Fabulous* (Dallas, Texas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1999), p. 14.
- ⁸ Berman, p. 17.
- ⁹ Jessica Milner Davis, *Farce* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd, 1978). Stuart E. Baker, *Georges Feydeau and the Aesthetics of Farce* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1981). Albert Bermel, *A History of Farce from Aristophanes to Woody Allen* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982).

Chapter 1

- ¹ Heather Dubrow, *Genre* (New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 7.
- ² Kenneth McLeish, *Inside the Ancient World: Roman Comedy* (London: MacMillan Education, 1976), p. 18
- ³ Leslie Smith, *Modern British Farce: a Selective Study of British Farce from Pinero to the Present Day* (London: MacMillan Press, 1989), p. 1.
- ⁴ Dubrow, p. 3.
- ⁵ Dubrow, p. 3.
- ⁶ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism Linguistics and the Study of Literature* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 116.
- ⁷ Tom Stoppard, *The Real Inspector Hound / After Magritte* (New York: Grove Press, 1975), p. 7.
- ⁸ Stoppard, *Hound*, p. 34.
- ⁹ Stoppard, *Hound*, p. 25.
- ¹⁰ Stoppard, *Hound*, p. 29.
- ¹¹ Bermel, p. 14.
- ¹² Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated with a commentary by George Whalley, edited by John Baxter and Patrick Athernon (Montreal & Kingston, London and Buffalo: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), p. 69. Augusto Boal summarises the “journey” the tragic character takes, according to Aristotle’s philosophy, as follows:
First Stage [the peripeteia]: Stimulation of the hamartia [a flaw in his/her behaviour]; the character follows an ascending path towards happiness, accompanied emphatically by the spectator. Then comes a moment of reversal: the character, with the spectator, starts to move from happiness toward misfortune; fall of the hero.

Second Stage: The character recognizes his [sic] error – *anagnorisis*. Through the emphatic relationship *dianoia-reason*, the spectator recognises his own error, his own hamartia, his own anticonstitutional flaw.

Third Stage: Catastrophe; the character suffers the consequences of his error, in a violent form, with his own death or with the death of loved ones.

Catharsis: The spectator, terrified by the spectacle of the catastrophe, is purified of his hamartia.

Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* Translated from the Spanish by Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride. (London: Pluto Press, 1979), p. 37.

¹³ Fintan O'Toole, *Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life: a Radical guide to Shakespearean Tragedy* (London and New York: Granta Books, 2002), p. 4.

¹⁴ O'Toole, p. 8.

¹⁵ David L. Hirst, *Tragicomedy* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 42.

¹⁶ Ironically, when Hamlet does act on impulse he accidentally kills Polonius.

¹⁷ Bermel, p. 15.

¹⁸ Bermel, p. 64.

¹⁹ Bermel, pp. 52-53.

²⁰ Bermel, p. 53.

²¹ Bermel, p. 52.

²² Points raised thus far, and in chapter one as a whole, will be further expanded upon in the rest of the thesis. Tragedy will be left for the next chapter, as it is more germane to the chapter's central topic: theatrical hierarchy.

²³ Milly S. Barranger, *Understanding Plays* (Boston, London, Sydney and Toronto: Allyn and Bacon, 1990), p. 128.

²⁴ Bernard Dukore, general advisor, *McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of World Drama. Volume 2: E – K* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), p. 40.

²⁵ Davis, p. 1. Unless otherwise stated, all references to Davis are made from the 1978 version of her work.

²⁶ Bermel, pp. 53-57.

²⁷ Throughout the thesis, the words humour and humorous will be used when discussing “funny” farcical situations, and wit and witty when considering the comical ones.

²⁸ Bermel, pp. 53-54.

²⁹ Bermel, p. 55.

³⁰ Bermel, p. 55.

³¹ Bermel, p. 56. I will be using the term “comedian” in two ways. The first describes a person who makes a living by entertaining people as a comic, such as a stand-up comedian, and the other as a way of describing a comical character. This is done in order to have a “comic” equivalent to the word farceur, which describes both a playwright who writes farce and a person who performs in one.

³² Bermel, p. 55.

³³ David Taylor, *Greek and Roman Topics: Acting and the Stage* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978), p. 9.

³⁴ F. H. Sandbach, *Ancient Culture and Society: The Comic Theatre of Greece and Rome* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1977), p. 15.

³⁵ Aristophanes, *The Frogs*, translated and edited by David Barrett (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd, 1964), p. 159.

³⁶ Aristophanes, *The Frogs*, p. 160.

³⁷ Aristophanes, *The Frogs*, pp. 157-158.

³⁸ Alan H. Sommerstein's translation, with different stage directions, is printed together with the Greek “original” which has none. Aristophanes, *The Frogs*, translated and edited by Alan H. Sommerstein (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips Ltd, 1996).

³⁹ Bermel, p. 54.

⁴⁰ Bermel, p. 53.

⁴¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, in *The Importance of Being Earnest and other plays*, edited by Richard Allen Cave (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 299.

⁴² Richard Allen Cave, ed., *The Importance of Being Earnest and other plays* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 421-422. The Lord Chamberlain only had power over plays in performance; Cave states that censored plays could still be read in their entirety in published form. Copies of works by Joe Orton published in the 1960s when the Lord Chamberlain still censored plays had a section at the end of the text pointing out which passages had to be cut or altered if the play was to be performed.

⁴³ Bermel, p. 61.

⁴⁴ Bermel, p. 63.

⁴⁵ Baker, pp. 12-13. This will be expanded upon later in this chapter.

⁴⁶ Davis, p. 71.

⁴⁷ It must once again be emphasised that the theories of these three writers describe archetypal forms of the genre. They too might set up binaries, but do so only as a means of conceptualising the genre.

⁴⁸ Bermel, p. 61.

⁴⁹ Bermel, pp. 61-62. This reiterates the use of hyperrealism in *The Real Inspector Hound*.

⁵⁰ Brian Rix, *Life in the Farce Lane, or, Tragedy With its Trousers Down: The A to C (Aristophanes to Cooney) of Farce*, with additional scenes by Jonathan Rix and décor by David Drummond (London: Andre Deutsch, 1995), p. 156.

⁵¹ Bermel, p. 69.

⁵² Noël Coward, *Blithe Spirit*, in *Plays: Four* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), p. 1.

⁵³ Or in a medieval carnival setting which will be explored in chapter two.

⁵⁴ Bermel, p. 68.

⁵⁵ Bermel, pp. 62-63.

⁵⁶ Georges Feydeau and Maurice Desvallieres, *Hotel Paradiso*, adapted by Peter Glenville (London: Heinemann, 1956), p. 3.

⁵⁷ The juxtaposition of all these plays illustrates Bermel's continents as the playwright borrows differing stylistic scenarios from other plays to create his own.

⁵⁸ Bermel, p. 63.

⁵⁹ Bermel, p. 63.

⁶⁰ Bermel, p. 61. In chapter two I will focus on *Commedia dell'Arte* and its relation to farce.

⁶¹ Bermel, p. 33.

⁶² Davis, p. 25.

⁶³ Davis, p. 28.

⁶⁴ Davis, p. 27.

⁶⁵ Bermel, p. 21.

⁶⁶ Alan E. Knight, *Aspects of Genre in Late Medieval Drama* (Manchester: University Press, 1983). I have chosen Knight's work because of his exploration of farcical morality. His focus on Medieval French farce is fortuitous because, as will be demonstrated in chapter two, the term "farce" originated in France in the middle ages, and those characteristics related to character morality still exist in the farces of the twenty-first century.

⁶⁷ Knight, p. 51. This emphasises Bermel and Davis's comment on farce being episodic in structure.

- ⁶⁸ Knight, p. 51.
- ⁶⁹ Knight, p. 51.
- ⁷⁰ Knight, p. 52.
- ⁷¹ Davis (2003), p. 8. If this were not so there would be no reason to laugh.
- ⁷² Anton Chekhov, *The Bear*, in *Anton Chekhov: Plays*, translated by Michael Frayn (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 36.
- ⁷³ Chekhov, *The Bear*, p. 36.
- ⁷⁴ This exemplifies the farcical characteristic (to be discussed later) apparent in many farces – particularly the simpler ones – involving a final return to normality.
- ⁷⁵ Vera Gottlieb, *Chekhov and the Vaudeville: a Study of Chekhov's One-Act Plays* (Cambridge: University Press, 1982), p. 50.
- ⁷⁶ Davis also uses this play to illustrate her category of “quarrel farce” and her analysis (pp. 52-54) makes similar observations.
- ⁷⁷ Davis, p. 50.
- ⁷⁸ Having a two or three act quarrel farce would be problematical because it would be difficult to continually discover new – and interesting – things to argue about.
- ⁷⁹ Gottlieb, *Chekhov and the Vaudeville*, p. 50.
- ⁸⁰ Gottlieb, *Chekhov and the Vaudeville*, p. 50.
- ⁸¹ By “unreality” I am not referring to a style of farce (that is, realism, fantasy, theatricalism and well-made-play) but rather to a characteristic of the genre as a whole.
- ⁸² Bermel, p. 22.
- ⁸³ Davis, p. 27.
- ⁸⁴ Bermel, p. 22.
- ⁸⁵ Bermel, p. 23.
- ⁸⁶ Eric Bentley, “The Psychology of Farce”, in *“Let's Get a Divorce!” and Other Plays*, edited by Eric Bentley (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), p. xiii. Baker describes this as “a weak defence, for it puts farce in a class with pornography” (p. 3).
- ⁸⁷ Bermel, p. 23.
- ⁸⁸ Bermel, p. 24.
- ⁸⁹ Bermel, p. 23.
- ⁹⁰ Bermel, p. 23.
- ⁹¹ Richard Curtis and Ben Elton, *Blackadder the Third* (London: Michael Joseph, 1998), p. 339.
- ⁹² Michael Pertwee, *Name Dropping: the Autobiography of Michael Pertwee* (London: Leslie Frewin, 1974), p. 146. I will explore the role of the actor in more detail in chapter three.
- ⁹³ Although the circular farce and the well-made-play are basically interchangeable, for the sake of simplicity I shall only be using Davis's definition from now on.
- ⁹⁴ Bermel, p. 26.
- ⁹⁵ Baker, pp. 12-13.
- ⁹⁶ Bermel, p. 24.
- ⁹⁷ Bermel, p. 24.
- ⁹⁸ Bermel, p. 24.
- ⁹⁹ Smith, p. 11.
- ¹⁰⁰ Vera Gottlieb, “Why This Farce?” in *New Theatre Quarterly*, 7 (1991), 218.
- ¹⁰¹ Davis, p. 71.
- ¹⁰² Michael Pertwee, *She's Done it Again* (London: English Theatre Guild Ltd, 1970), pp. 2.8-2.9.

¹⁰³ Georges Feydeau, *Le Mariage de Barillon*, in *Four Farces by Georges Feydeau*, translated by Norman R. Shapiro (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 79.

¹⁰⁴ Baker, p. 53.

¹⁰⁵ Feydeau, *Le Mariage de Barillon*, p. 79.

¹⁰⁶ Madame Jambart is now apparently married to both Jambart and Barillon. Their lives become hectic as society rejects them for being in a polygamous relationship.

¹⁰⁷ Smith, p. 12.

¹⁰⁸ Georges Feydeau, *Un Fil à la patte*, in *Four Farces by Georges Feydeau*, translated by Norman R. Shapiro (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1959), pp. 281-282.

¹⁰⁹ Richard chose such an outrageous name for himself so that he would not be recognised and no questions would be asked.

¹¹⁰ Bermel, p. 27.

¹¹¹ Davis, p. 65.

¹¹² The talisman farce is in no way obsolete and is still popular in the twentieth century. For example, Ray Galton and John Antrobus' *When Did You Last See Your Trousers?* (1988) is characterised by a burglar stealing Howard Swerling's trousers while he is asleep in bed with his mistress. All the farcical elements in the play derive from Howard being unable to obtain another pair because of constant interference from other characters.

¹¹³ Davis, p. 70.

¹¹⁴ Davis, pp. 68-69.

¹¹⁵ Davis, p. 50.

¹¹⁶ Carlo Goldoni, *The Fan*, translated by Eleanor and Herbert Farjeon, in *Carlo Goldoni: Three Comedies*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), pp. 259-260.

¹¹⁷ Davis, pp. 70-71.

¹¹⁸ Bermel, p. 30.

¹¹⁹ Bermel, p. 29.

¹²⁰ Bermel, p. 29.

¹²¹ Bermel, p. 29. The machine is similar to the object and becomes even more "life like" through its own automation. A machine can be anything from a revolver to an automobile. Bermel outlines four ways in which a machine may oppose humanity:

They break down when somebody depends on them to keep working; they go on working normally when it's important that they stop; they go at the wrong speed or go out of control; and they get destroyed. There are unnumbered variations possible on these four basic types of mechanical cussedness. But each of them corresponds dramaturgically to farcical events in which there is no machinery and the acting is done wholly by human beings and objects (p. 30).

With the arrival of the early silent movies, machines have played a greater and greater role in farce; in particular the automobile, which Bermel describes as the "hardest working machine performer" (p. 30). This is hardly surprising as the silent film era coincided with the widespread availability, and therefore familiarity, of the audience with the automobile. I will briefly analyse the role of the machine in chapter three.

¹²² Bermel, pp. 27-28.

¹²³ Smith, p. 11.

¹²⁴ Rix, p. 112.

¹²⁵ The use of panic in farce will be a focus of chapter three.

¹²⁶ Katherine Worth, "Farce and Michael Frayn", in *Modern Drama*, 26, 1983, p. 48.

¹²⁷ Worth, p. 53.

¹²⁸ Gottlieb, "Why this Farce?" p. 222.

¹²⁹ This could be seen in the earlier extended description of a scene from *Two Into One* which is very long – and convoluted – on paper but would occur very quickly on stage.

¹³⁰ Smith, p. 10.

¹³¹ T. G. A. Nelson *Comedy: the Theory of Comedy in Literature, Drama and Cinema* (Oxford: University Press, 1990), pp. 26-27.

Chapter 2

¹ Russ McDonald, “Fear of Farce”, in *“Bad” Shakespeare*, edited by Maurice Charney (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1988), p. 77.

² Bermel, p. 57.

³ John Dennis Hurrell, “A Note on Farce”, in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, second edition, edited by Robert W. Corrigan (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1981), p. 212.

⁴ Tragedy and farce will be explored in more depth at the end of this chapter after Commedia and carnival have been discussed.

⁵ Baker, p. 1.

⁶ Smith, p. 4.

⁷ Davis, p. 7.

⁸ Davis, p. 25.

⁹ Davis, p. 7.

¹⁰ Davis, p. 7. This stylistic “migration” has been discussed in relation to Bermel and his “continents” in chapter one.

¹¹ Smith, p. 5.

¹² Smith, p. 5.

¹³ Nicholas Brooke, *Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy* (London: Open Books, 1979), p. 3.

¹⁴ Judy Pearsall, ed., *The New Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 1965.

¹⁵ One would infer that tragedy is a solemn affair, which treats its characters (and audience) both seriously and respectfully. As the playwright has dignified the characters by gracing them with tragic roles, an audience which is experiencing a performance, or a scholar who is studying the text, should afford the play that same dignity. Aristotle defines tragedy as “serious and purposeful, having magnitude; [and] uttered in heightened language” (Aristotle, pp. 67-69). On the other hand, farce could be seen as belittling its characters by ridiculing them. As a result, the play is also belittled.

¹⁶ The scene would be made even more farcical if during a production of the play, the staging included some “hat business” with Osrick continually removing and replacing his hat as quickly as Hamlet’s whim changes.

¹⁷ Nelson, p. 29.

¹⁸ Brooke, p. 4.

¹⁹ Nelson, p. 29.

²⁰ Bermel offers a differentiation between tragedy and melodrama:

A tragedy deals with a leading character, the protagonist, who, consciously or unconsciously, wills his or her own downfall, and then, because of certain temperamental deficiencies (the “tragic flaw”), brings that downfall to pass. Self-will is at the heart of the formula, not high seriousness, which is superficial, an author’s ornamentation. If a protagonist brings about the downfall of somebody else – an antagonist, say – or if the antagonist brings about the protagonist’s downfall, then the work is not a tragedy, but a melodrama. And not inferior for

that reason (pp. 57-58).

Because his book focuses specifically on farce, Bermel's definitions of the other genres are fairly simplistic, and – particularly with tragedy – very Aristotelian. Although in-depth studies of comedy, tragedy and, in particular, melodrama are also beyond the scope of this thesis, I shall not attempt to offer any simplified definitions of these other genres. This section aims only to provide a brief overview of the similarities between tragedy and farce.

²¹ Smith, p. 7.

²² Norman R. Shapiro, "Introduction", in *Four Farces by Georges Feydeau*, translated by Shapiro (Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. xxxiv.

²³ Leonard C. Pronko, "Georges Feydeau: the Geometry of Madness", in *Comedy: Meaning and Form*, edited by Robert W. Corrigan, second edition (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1981), p. 283.

²⁴ Aristotle, p. 63.

²⁵ The use of "elevated" characters will be explored later in this chapter.

²⁶ Maurice Charney, *Comedy High and Low: an Introduction to the Experience of Comedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 105.

²⁷ In a 2001 production at the New Fortune Theatre at the University of Western Australia these two characters, having just left the Capulet party, arrived on stage blind drunk. By playing the characters as drunk, this would free the actors to give Benvolio and Mercutio different personalities in their inebriated state, perhaps playing a side of them that is kept hidden.

²⁸ Peter Thomson, *Shakespeare's Theatre*, second edition (London and New York: 1992), p. 91.

²⁹ Charles Boyce, *Encyclopedia of Shakespeare: A - Z of His Life and Works* (New York and Oxford: Roundtable Press, 1990), p. 189.

³⁰ Robert Orstein, *Shakespeare's Comedies: From Roman farce to Romantic Mystery*, (New York: University of Delaware Press, 1986), p. 27.

³¹ Shakespeare "adopted the idea of the twin slaves, although in Plautus neither the masters nor the slaves are twins". T. S. Dorsch, "Introduction", in *The Comedy of Errors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 8.

³² Gwyn Williams goes so far as to suggest that Shakespeare had intended to write a tragedy, but "may not have felt sufficiently confident at this stage in his career to allow this to happen. It may have been thought too outrageous a flouting of a classical model at a time when Shakespeare was in open competition with university wits". Gwyn Williams, *Person and Persona: Studies in Shakespeare* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1981), p. 34.

³³ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate Limited, 1999), p. 21.

³⁴ McDonald, p. 79.

³⁵ Bloom, p. 23.

³⁶ T. S. Dorsch, p. 12.

³⁷ Peter Hyland, *An Introduction to Shakespeare: the Dramatist in his Context* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1996), p. 102.

³⁸ Boyce, p. 589.

³⁹ Hyland, p. 80.

⁴⁰ Hyland, p. 91.

⁴¹ Ralph Berry, *On Directing Shakespeare: Interviews with Contemporary Directors* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 7.

- ⁴² This can also be noted in the long description of the scene from *Two Into One* in the previous chapter which was quite ponderous.
- ⁴³ Eric Bentley, "The Psychology of Farce", p. vii.
- ⁴⁴ Davis, p. 18.
- ⁴⁵ Bermel, p. 14.
- ⁴⁶ Baker, p. 1.
- ⁴⁷ Baker, p. 2.
- ⁴⁸ David Taylor, p. 9.
- ⁴⁹ I have seen productions where many words and phrases are accompanied by their own gesture to underline what is being said to ensure audience understanding. Other performances have been characterized by so much action that the spectator was in danger of focusing only on the physical and completely ignoring the verbal.
- ⁵⁰ Even Commedia dell'Arte did not allow the *zanni*'s antics to ruin the story line.
- ⁵¹ By dynamic action, I mean the actors being "in the moment" and physically using the stage space to full effect, with the context, environment, time and emotional state of the characters being taken into consideration.
- ⁵² Charney, p. 112.
- ⁵³ Richard Andrews, "Theatre", in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), p. 277.
- ⁵⁴ Kenneth and Laura Richards, *The Commedia dell'Arte* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 80-93. Commedia performances had to entertain, or they would not be paid and be unable to make a living.
- ⁵⁵ In Italian, *scenario* and *soggetto* are singular and *scenari* and *soggetti* are plural.
- ⁵⁶ Richards and Richards, p. 141.
- ⁵⁷ Richards and Richards, p. 142.
- ⁵⁸ Hence the term *figli dell'arte*, where *arte* meant, above all, perceiving acting as a profession.
- ⁵⁹ In Italian, *lazzo* is singular and *lazzi* is plural.
- ⁶⁰ Mel Gordon, *Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell'Arte* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), p. 4.
- ⁶¹ Gordon, p. 5.
- ⁶² Gordon, p. 5.
- ⁶³ As Elizabethan actors and playwrights would take ideas from other performances, so the Italian Commedia troupes would "steal" *lazzi* from each other.
- ⁶⁴ Gordon, p. 8.
- ⁶⁵ Richards and Richards provide a good selection of these passages on pp. 178-184.
- ⁶⁶ Richards and Richards, p. 112.
- ⁶⁷ Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd., 1981), p. 143.
- ⁶⁸ Johnstone, p. 148.
- ⁶⁹ Johnstone, p. 150.
- ⁷⁰ The importance of the players' physiognomy will be focused on in greater detail in chapter three when discussing Basil Fawlty in *Fawlty Towers*.
- ⁷¹ Richards and Richards, p. 111.
- ⁷² Gordon suggests that there were also serious servants but these may have been simply walk-on characters who didn't have any lines and weren't there to add to the action in any way.
- ⁷³ Gordon, p. 60.
- ⁷⁴ The word *zany*, which evolved from the word *zanni*, sums up their personalities

perfectly.

⁷⁵ Gordon, p. 60.

⁷⁶ Many of the farcical routines which will be explored in the remainder of the chapter involve either deception, humiliation or revenge farce.

⁷⁷ Baker, p. 13.

⁷⁸ Baker, p. 16.

⁷⁹ Baker, p. 17.

⁸⁰ Baker, p. 17. In other words, Keaton was not fully “unreal” because a photograph of a human being – albeit stationary – is still an image of reality.

⁸¹ Baker, p. 17.

⁸² Baker, p. 18.

⁸³ Christopher Cairns, “Dario Fo and the Commedia dell’arte”, in *Studies in the Commedia dell’Arte*, edited by David J. George and Christopher J. Gossip, (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), p. 247.

⁸⁴ Richards and Richards, pp. 258-262.

⁸⁵ H. Gaston Hall, *Comedy in Context: Essays on Molière* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), pp. xvii-xx.

⁸⁶ Richards and Richards, p. 262.

⁸⁷ Eugene, Steele, *Carlo Goldoni: Life, Work, and Times* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1981), p. 44.

⁸⁸ Timothy Holme, *A Servant of Many Masters: The Life and Times of Carlo Goldoni* (London: Jupiter Books Limited, 1976), p. 79.

⁸⁹ Holme, p. 91.

⁹⁰ Boyce, p. 125.

⁹¹ Louise George Clubb, “Commedia Grave and *The Comedy of Errors*”, in *The Comedy of Errors: Critical Essays*, edited by Robert S. Miola (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), p. 187.

⁹² Andrew Grewar, “Shakespeare and the actors of the *Commedia dell’arte*”, in *Studies in the Commedia dell’Arte*, edited by David J. George and Christopher J. Gossip (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), p. 16.

⁹³ Hyland, p. 87.

⁹⁴ Phyllis Hartnoll, *The Theatre: a Concise History*, second edition (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p. 73.

⁹⁵ Hyland, p. 84.

⁹⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, edited by Frances E. Dolan (Boston and New York: Bedford Books of St Martin’s Press, 1996), p. 89.

⁹⁷ Grewar, p. 19.

⁹⁸ Grewar, p. 19.

⁹⁹ William Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, edited by John Kerrigan (London: Penguin Books, 1982), p. 129.

¹⁰⁰ William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, edited by Elizabeth Story Donno (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 61.

¹⁰¹ Grewar, p. 19.

¹⁰² Boyce, p. 126.

¹⁰³ Boyce, p. 125.

¹⁰⁴ Ray Cooney and Tony Hilton, *One for the Pot* (London: The English Theatre Guild, 1963), p. 6.

¹⁰⁵ Grewar, p. 21.

¹⁰⁶ The 1599 Quarto of *Romeo and Juliet* has, at the end of Act 4, “the direction *Enter*

Will Kemp...instead of *Enter Peter*". He was also assigned the speeches of Dogberry in the 1600 Quarto of *Much Ado About Nothing* (Grewar, pp. 22-23).

¹⁰⁷ Kempe danced the Morris over nine days all the way from London to Norwich in 1600 and then wrote a book about his journey entitled *Kemps nine daies wonder* (Boyce, p. 335).

¹⁰⁸ Grewar, p. 34.

¹⁰⁹ Hyland, p. 85.

¹¹⁰ Smith, p. 79.

¹¹¹ Smith, pp. 78-79.

¹¹² Smith, p. 79.

¹¹³ Bermel, p. 76.

¹¹⁴ Hartnoll, p. 32. Bermel describes the minstrel as the ancestor to such modern entertainers as "the wondering poet...vaudeville and Borscht Belt comedian, the TV and nightclub star, and the popular singer" (Bermel, p. 78).

¹¹⁵ Bermel, p. 78.

¹¹⁶ Bermel, p. 78.

¹¹⁷ James Keller, "Drama, Medieval", in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature*, edited by Robert Thomas Lambdin and Laura Cooner Lambdin (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 2000), p. 152.

¹¹⁸ Bermel, p. 76.

¹¹⁹ Bermel, p. 79.

¹²⁰ Keller, p. 153.

¹²¹ Keller, p. 152.

¹²² Knight, pp. 17-40.

¹²³ Knight, pp. 68-69.

¹²⁴ Knight, p. 72.

¹²⁵ Knight, p. 80. Here Knight foreshadows the more complex farcical forms discussed by Davis, Bermel and Baker.

¹²⁶ Davis, p. 12.

¹²⁷ Davis, p. 12.

¹²⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1984), p. 5.

¹²⁹ Knight, p. 109.

¹³⁰ Jessica Milner Davis, *Farce* (London and New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2003), p. 37.

¹³¹ Bakhtin, p. 197.

¹³² Davis, p. 3.

¹³³ For example, as discussed in chapter one, *The Birds* and *The Frogs* presents the Greek gods as objects of ridicule.

¹³⁴ Sandbach, pp. 16-18.

¹³⁵ Bakhtin, extract from *Rabelais and His World*, in *The Bakhtin Reader*, edited by Pam Morris (London: Edward Ardon, 1994), p. 197.

¹³⁶ Davis, pp. 8-9.

¹³⁷ Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: University Press, 1997), p. 149.

¹³⁸ As stated by Vice, "carnival's absence of footlights both encourages and prohibits linking it to drama" (p. 149).

¹³⁹ Bermel, p. 42.

¹⁴⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, p. 208. While laughter will be the focus of chapter four, it is important to signal its importance to this thesis now, especially

considering Bakhtin's emphasis on it as a rebellious force and its strong relationship with carnival.

¹⁴¹ Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, p. 209.

¹⁴² Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, p. 209.

¹⁴³ Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, p. 201.

¹⁴⁴ Vice, p. 152.

¹⁴⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. 19-20.

¹⁴⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 21.

¹⁴⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 18.

¹⁴⁸ Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1972), p. 27.

¹⁴⁹ Thomson, p. 2.

¹⁵⁰ Thomson, p. 27.

¹⁵¹ Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies and Contradictions in Art and Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 3.

¹⁵² Harpham, p. 4.

¹⁵³ Harpham, p. 7.

¹⁵⁴ Thomson, pp. 22-23.

¹⁵⁵ Thomson, pp. 26-27.

¹⁵⁶ Bermel, p. 46.

¹⁵⁷ Bermel, p. 46.

¹⁵⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 19.

¹⁵⁹ Robert W. Corrigan, "Introduction", in *Roman Drama* (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1966), pp. 11-12.

¹⁶⁰ I shall return to the concept regarding the farcical use of the taboo subject, or object, in chapter three.

Chapter 3

¹ Kim "Howard" Johnson, *The First 280 Years of Monty Python*, second edition (New York: St Martin's Griffin, 1999), p. 157.

² Unless otherwise stated, all references to and direct quotes by John Cleese have been taken from an interview included in the 1998 box set of the complete *Fawlty Towers*. I have transcribed the whole interview but, because of its length, have not included it as an appendix. This interview is not an academic work and John Cleese does generalise on a number of topics, including the personality of the "British". However, his ideas tend to support those offered by scholars in the field, even if he tends to alternate between the terms "comedy" and "farce" while offering extremely useful "inside" information because of his practical involvement in the series.

³ Johnson, p. 275.

⁴ Johnson, pp. 274-275.

⁵ Johnson, p. 274.

⁶ Ironically, many of Feydeau's most famous farces, for example *Hotel Paradiso*, have scenes set in a hotel. Indeed, as I will discuss in chapter five, the hotel setting is a perfect locale for farce.

⁷ Morris Bright and Robert Ross, *Fawlty Towers Fully Booked: The Complete Story of the Nation's Favourite Sitcom* (London: BBC Worldwide Ltd, 2001), p. 47.

⁸ Johnson, p. 276.

⁹ Ian Bernard, *Film and Television Acting: From Stage to Screen*, second edition (Boston: Focal Press, 1998), p. 82.

- ¹⁰ Bernard, p. 82.
- ¹¹ Bernard, p. 82.
- ¹² Andy Medhurst, "A History of Sitcom", in *Teaching TV Sitcom* by Cary Bazalgette *et al*, second edition (London: BFI, 1989), pp. 7-8.
- ¹³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, volume XV, Ser-Soosy, p. 570.
- ¹⁴ *Macquarie Dictionary*, p. 1638.
- ¹⁵ *BBC English Dictionary*, p. 1091.
- ¹⁶ Medhurst, p. 11. Internal quote taken from an unnamed source.
- ¹⁷ Linda Aronson, *Television Writing: the Ground Rules of Series, Serials and Sitcom* (North Ryde, NSW: Australian Film Television and Radio School, 2000), p. 13.
- ¹⁸ John Cleese and Connie Booth, *The Complete Fawlty Towers* (London: Methuen Humour, 1989), p. 309.
- ¹⁹ Aronson, p. 13.
- ²⁰ Barrie McMahon and Robyn Quin, *Real Images: Film and Television* (South Melbourne: Macmillan Company of Australia, 1986), pp. 211-213.
- ²¹ McMahon and Quin, p. 212.
- ²² McMahon and Quin, p. 212. The representation of class differences in farce will be analysed in chapter five.
- ²³ This will be expanded upon in this chapter and chapter five.
- ²⁴ Baker, pp. 12-24.
- ²⁵ Cleese and Booth, p. 71.
- ²⁶ Cleese and Booth, p. 256.
- ²⁷ Cleese and Booth, p. 147.
- ²⁸ Cleese and Booth, p. 315.
- ²⁹ Cleese and Booth, p. 331.
- ³⁰ Cleese and Booth, p. 214.
- ³¹ Cleese and Booth, p. 156.
- ³² Harold Snoad, *Directing Situation Comedy* (London: BBC Television Training, 1988), p. 5.
- ³³ Bright and Ross, pp. 24-35.
- ³⁴ As Cooney writes in Rix's *Life in the Farce Lane*:
 The ability to re-write is essential. My farces are pure concoctions. I never get it right the first time. The original script is comparable to a middle-of-the-range Ford motor car. By the time it appears on the West End stage it must have acquired the precision, the elegance and the comfort of a Rolls Royce.
 I attempt to achieve this by, initially, having a play-reading of the first draft of the script to a small invited audience. Then, having learnt if the basic premise holds good and how the various comedic ramifications amused them, I take the play back to the drawing board.
 Huge areas are then restructured, re-written and generally re-shaped before the next step, which is the 'try-out' production in a regional repertory theatre. Characters may be added or removed in order to serve the requirements of the play. Once I know from the initial response that the basis of the play is sound, no amount of time and effort is spared to get the play right for its regional try-out.
 And after the try-out, more re-writing. Every single moment has to work. A West End production is not mounted until I know for sure that the play is as perfect as I can get it to be (Rix, pp. 155-156).
- ³⁵ Cleese and Booth, p. 219.
- ³⁶ Situational misunderstandings should not be confused with character misunderstandings, outlined earlier.
- ³⁷ Bermel, pp. 25-26.
- ³⁸ Bermel, p. 42.
- ³⁹ Bright and Ross, p. 47. According to these authors, the first was entitled *Snavely*

starring Harvey Korman and Betty White, and the second, in 1983, called *Amanda's by the Sea* had Beatrice Arthur as the owner of the hotel and eliminated the Basil Fawlty character (p. 47).

⁴⁰ This verifies Bermel's point that "farce [is remembered] for its individual turns or shticks, not its continuity" (p. 61).

⁴¹ Snoad, p. 7.

⁴² Snoad, p. 53.

⁴³ Snoad, p. 6.

⁴⁴ Cleese states that at the time, there was an unwritten rule that no "sweetening" (in the form of canned laughter) would be used in a BBC sitcom.

⁴⁵ Bermel, p. 42.

⁴⁶ Bernard, p. 66.

⁴⁷ Medhurst, p. 11.

⁴⁸ Bermel, p. 423.

⁴⁹ Snoad, pp. 17-20.

⁵⁰ Gary Berman, *Best of the Britcoms: From Fawlty Towers to Absolutely Fabulous* (Dallas, Texas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1999), p. xvii.

⁵¹ Berman, p. xvii.

⁵² Cleese and Booth, pp. 129-130.

⁵³ Snoad, p. 7.

⁵⁴ Cleese and Booth, p. 309.

⁵⁵ Basil unsuccessfully attempts to light up in *The Hotel Inspectors*.

⁵⁶ As has already been argued, within the context of farce, there are many examples of high-status individuals either falling, or being in danger of falling, from their elevated place in society. Robert Provine highlights research carried out by Rose Coser which concluded that people high in a social hierarchy would direct their witticisms at someone lower down but never the other way round (Robert R. Provine, *Laughter: a Scientific Investigation*, New York: Viking Penguin, 2000, pp. 29-30). Although this did not take into account what those lower in the hierarchy said behind their superiors' backs "a change in power status probably brings about a shift in laugh pattern" (Provine, p. 30). Thus, as with the laughter present in medieval carnival, what makes the laughter directed at "superior" farcical characters doubly sweet is the freedom offered to the observer to laugh openly at a person of high status. The rigidity and seriousness towards one's superior is broken down, with there being no danger of retaliation. Basil sets himself up to constantly fall because of his obsession with social hierarchy, generally considering himself above his hotel guests. Exceptions include his fawning over people of a higher social or professional status such as a Lord or a doctor, his flirting with Raylene Miles in *The Psychiatrist* and his fear of such characters as the psychiatrist Dr Abbott, who might prove dangerous in that he can "read" Basil's personality. (Basil's obsession with social hierarchy will be explored in chapter five.)

⁵⁷ Barry Curtis, "Aspects of Sitcom", in *Television Sitcom*, edited by Jim Cook (London: BFI Publishing, 1982), pp. 6-7.

⁵⁸ Cleese and Booth, p. 40.

⁵⁹ Robert Benedetti, *The Actor at Work*, fifth edition (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 84.

⁶⁰ Benedetti, p. 84.

⁶¹ Bernard, p. 64.

⁶² Malcolm Taylor, *The Actor and the Camera* (London: A and C Black, 1994), p. 129.

⁶³ Aronson, p. 14. Character interaction will be explored in more detail in chapter five.

- ⁶⁴ The exception was *Basil the Rat* which, according to Bright and Ross, took two days to film because of the complicated special effects (Bright and Ross, pp. 41-42).
- ⁶⁵ Snoad, p. 24.
- ⁶⁶ Cleese and Booth, pp. 102-103.
- ⁶⁷ The study of “types” will be introduced in this chapter and expanded upon in chapter five.
- ⁶⁸ Cleese and Booth, p. 51.
- ⁶⁹ Iain Johnstone, “Fawlty Towers”, in *British Comedy Greats*, edited by Annabel Merullo and Neil Wenborn (London: Cassell Illustrated, 2003), p. 75.
- ⁷⁰ Cleese and Booth, p. 167. On the other hand, as will be discussed in chapter five, Basil does attempt to present a “different face” to the world.
- ⁷¹ Cleese and Booth, p. 294.
- ⁷² The meaning of the term “grotesque” shall be the same as that employed in the previous chapter, that is, the combination of two opposing characteristics.
- ⁷³ Baker, p. 17.
- ⁷⁴ Cleese and Booth, pp. 256-257.
- ⁷⁵ Cleese and Booth, pp. 259-260.
- ⁷⁶ Cleese and Booth, p. 263.

Chapter 4

- ¹ Norman H. Holland, *Laughing: a Psychology of Humour* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 76.
- ² Space constraints prevent a detailed canvassing of a large selection of theories. Therefore, those explored have been chosen on the basis of their reliability and/or how big an impact they have had on how laughter is conceived.
- ³ Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Essays in Anthropology* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 84.
- ⁴ Herbert M. Lefcourt, *Humor: the Psychology of Living Buoyantly* (New York: Plenum Publishers, 2001), p. 26.
- ⁵ Bermel, p. 43.
- ⁶ Robin Andrew Haig, *The Anatomy of Humor: Biopsychosocial and Therapeutic Perspectives* (Springfield, Illinois, USA: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1988), p. 30.
- ⁷ Holland, p. 76.
- ⁸ There are times when a joke requires explaining because the person listening does not understand the context. However, it has been my experience that once explained it is no longer found humorous.
- ⁹ Cleese and Booth, p. 102.
- ¹⁰ Lefcourt, p. 27. See the section in chapter three on how a knowledge of past events in *Fawlty Towers* can contribute to the humorous context.
- ¹¹ Provine, p. 49.
- ¹² Provine, p. 49.
- ¹³ Even the individual who suddenly bursts into laughter, without apparent cause, might be recalling some laughter-inducing event in a particular context.
- ¹⁴ Provine, p. 24.
- ¹⁵ The psychological theories will be returned to and explored in more detail later in the chapter.
- ¹⁶ Paul E. McGhee, *Humor: its Origin and Development* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1979), p. 41.

- ¹⁷ Provine, p. 11.
- ¹⁸ Lefcourt, p. 27.
- ¹⁹ McGhee, p. 42.
- ²⁰ Haig, p. 9. I am classing the psychoanalytic approach as a philosophy because it does not involve the same degree of empirical research as that carried out by such researchers as Provine.
- ²¹ Haig, p. 10.
- ²² Holland, p. 21.
- ²³ Holland, p. 22.
- ²⁴ Cleese and Booth, p. 203.
- ²⁵ Holland, p. 22.
- ²⁶ Holland, p. 24. Incongruity will be further explored later in this chapter using the theories of Moses Bainy.
- ²⁷ Cleese and Booth, p. 312.
- ²⁸ Haig, p. 10.
- ²⁹ Haig, p. 10.
- ³⁰ Haig, p. 30. While Freud's psychoanalytical theories have profoundly influenced modern life, I have chosen to focus on Bergson's theories on laughter as his use of a theatrical model – especially in it being farce – concurs with the line of argument I am taking in this chapter.
- ³¹ Haig, p. 10.
- ³² Henri Bergson, "Laughter". In *Comedy*. Edited by Wylie Sypher (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Book, 1956), p. 62. This reference to anthropomorphism relates to my discussion of the dog in *A Fish Called Wanda* in chapter one.
- ³³ Bergson, p. 63.
- ³⁴ Bergson, p. 63.
- ³⁵ Bergson, p. 64.
- ³⁶ Holland, p. 31.
- ³⁷ Bergson, p. 92.
- ³⁸ Bergson, p. 66.
- ³⁹ Bermel, p. 26.
- ⁴⁰ Haig, p. 10.
- ⁴¹ Eric Bentley, *The Life of Drama* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), p. 229.
- ⁴² Aristotle, p. 69.
- ⁴³ Moses Bainy, *Why do we Laugh or Cry?* (West Ryde, NSW: Sunlight Publications, 1993), p. vii.
- ⁴⁴ Bainy, pp. viii–ix.
- ⁴⁵ Bainy, p. 75.
- ⁴⁶ Cleese and Booth, p. 114.
- ⁴⁷ Bainy, pp. 74-75. The physiological, philosophical and psychological will now be explored using Bainy's theories.
- ⁴⁸ Bainy, p. 73.
- ⁴⁹ This is not a clinical definition but my own interpretation after having researched Bainy's work.
- ⁵⁰ Lefcourt, p. 55.
- ⁵¹ Bermel, p. 41.
- ⁵² Provine, p. 24.
- ⁵³ Provine, p. 25.
- ⁵⁴ Provine describes a laughter episode as "consist[ing] of the comment immediately

preceding laughter, and all laughter occurring within one second after the onset of the first laughter” (p. 26).

⁵⁵ Provine, p. 28.

⁵⁶ Bermel, P. 39

⁵⁷ Provine, pp. 37-38.

⁵⁸ Provine, p. 39.

⁵⁹ Provine, p. 39.

⁶⁰ Provine, p. 39.

⁶¹ Provine, p. 40.

⁶² This demonstrates the vital importance of the cognitive aspect of laughter, where the brain is required to process information in order for it to be considered amusing.

⁶³ Provine, p. 42.

⁶⁴ Cleese and Booth, p. 27.

⁶⁵ Provine, p. 181.

⁶⁶ Cleese and Booth, p. 48.

⁶⁷ Cleese and Booth, p. 39.

⁶⁸ Cleese and Booth, p. 205.

⁶⁹ Cleese and Booth, p. 198.

⁷⁰ Cleese and Booth, p. 8.

⁷¹ Cleese and Booth, p. 184.

⁷² Dennis M. and Valentina McInerney, *Educational Psychology: Constructive Learning*, second edition (Wollongong: Pearson Education Australia, 1998), p. 109.

⁷³ Provine, p. 44.

⁷⁴ Provine, p. 47.

⁷⁵ Provine, p. 44.

⁷⁶ Provine, p. 45.

⁷⁷ Bergson, p. 64.

⁷⁸ Lefcourt, p. 166.

⁷⁹ Lefcourt, p. 63.

⁸⁰ Provine, p. 47.

⁸¹ Cleese and Booth, p. 51.

⁸² Seymour Fisher and Rhoda L. Fisher, *Pretend the World is Funny and Forever: a Psychological Analysis of Comedians, Clowns and Actors* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1981), pp. 2-3.

⁸³ Fisher and Fisher, p. 10.

⁸⁴ Lefcourt, p. 84.

⁸⁵ Lefcourt, p. 87.

⁸⁶ Dennis and Valentina McInerney describe the id as “the source of basic biological needs and desires” (p. 355). This connects to the amoral behaviour of many farcical characters found in the works of Feydeau, Pertwee, Cooney, *et al.*

⁸⁷ Cleese and Booth, pp. 91-92.

Chapter 5

¹ This is only one of many possible interpretations for the series but my choice of seeing Basil as a pseudo-Victorian is not an arbitrary one, and provides me with a contextual basis which permits me to analyse why he behaves the way he does.

² Cleese and Booth, p. 4.

³ Cleese and Booth, p. 11.

- ⁴ Cleese and Booth, p. 115.
- ⁵ Bright and Ross, p. 70.
- ⁶ Cleese and Booth, p. 151.
- ⁷ Cleese and Booth, p. 45.
- ⁸ Cleese and Booth, p. 313.
- ⁹ Cleese and Booth, p. 82.
- ¹⁰ Bright and Ross, p. 80.
- ¹¹ Nonetheless, she still informs the hotel inspector that “He’s from Barcelona” (Cleese and Booth, p. 321) when he is seen behaving in an irrational manner.
- ¹² Cleese and Booth, p. 313.
- ¹³ Aronson, pp. 14-15.
- ¹⁴ Bright and Ross, p. 90.
- ¹⁵ Bright and Ross, p. 90.
- ¹⁶ Cleese and Booth, p. 53.
- ¹⁷ Cleese and Booth, p. 83.
- ¹⁸ As stated by Douglas A. Lorimer,
 Victorian discourses on race encompassed a struggle between two rival visions. The advocates of humanitarian causes and the civilizing mission espoused a goal of assimilation, and believed in the common origin and psychic unity of human beings. Their opponents, at least the extreme racialists among them, argued that the races had separate origins, and distinct, unequal characteristics. Depending on the historical context, they advocated a strategy either of exclusion or of separate and unequal development. Both positions, the assimilating cultural imperialism and the exclusionary doctrine of global apartheid, were variants of racism. Both presumed that the agents of western civilization had the power and the right to transform other people’s lives, and both assumed that in the resultant new order a hierarchy of races, like a hierarchy of social class, would exist. (Douglas A. Lorimer, “Race, science and culture: historical continuities and discontinuities, 1850-1914, in *The Victorians and Race*, edited by Shearer West (Hants, England: Scolar Press, 1996), p. 23.)
- ¹⁹ O’Toole, p. 6.
- ²⁰ Ronald Robinson and John Gallagher with Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: the Official Mind of the Victorians*, second edition (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1981), p. 1.
- ²¹ Steve Attridge, *Nationalism, Imperialism and Identity in Late Victorian Culture: Civil and Military Worlds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 5.
- ²² According to E. J. Hobsbawm, “even ancient and deep rooted monarchies [in Europe] conceded that money was now as useful a criterion of nobility as blue blood”. (E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), p. 171.)
- ²³ A. H. Halsey, *Change in British Society*, fourth edition (New York and Oxford: University Press, 1995), p. 29.
- ²⁴ Halsey, p. 31.
- ²⁵ Robinson, Gallagher and Denny, p. 3.
- ²⁶ Halsey, p. 57.
- ²⁷ Cleese and Booth, p. 11.
- ²⁸ Cleese and Booth, p. 39.
- ²⁹ Cleese and Booth, p. 44.
- ³⁰ Cleese and Booth, pp. 44-45.
- ³¹ Cleese and Booth, p. 31.
- ³² Cleese and Booth, p. 4.
- ³³ Cleese and Booth, p. 31.
- ³⁴ This applies equally to Manuel who would work more effectively if he were given a

chance to learn the English language.

³⁵ Cleese and Booth, pp. 70-71.

³⁶ Cleese and Booth, p. 108.

³⁷ Cleese and Booth, p. 110.

³⁸ Cleese and Booth, p. 108.

³⁹ Cleese and Booth, p. 120.

⁴⁰ Davis Taylor, pp. 12-13.

⁴¹ Oswyn Murray, *Early Greece*, second edition (London: Fontana Press, 1993), p. 214.

⁴² Cleese and Booth, p. 121.

⁴³ Cleese and Booth, p. 74.

⁴⁴ Ironically, her name has sexual connotations by being the French for “night dress” – implying that she is constantly “dressed” for the bedroom and her character is constantly obsessed with sexuality.

⁴⁵ There are many instances in *Fawlty Towers* where Basil shows himself to be a prude. For example, in *The Wedding Party* he acts in a self-righteous manner when he believes that some of his guests are up to “no good”. And, in *The Psychiatrist* Basil is convinced that all psychiatrists are obsessed with sex. He vehemently shows his disgust and then misunderstands the psychiatrist (Dr Abbott), and believes that Abbott is asking him about his sex life. Although Basil’s repressed sexuality – in relation to the Victorian views on sexuality – would be an interesting topic of discussion, because my focus is specifically on Basil’s Anglophilic nature, this remains beyond the scope of this thesis.

⁴⁶ Cleese and Booth, p. 221.

⁴⁷ Cleese and Booth, p. 224.

⁴⁸ Cleese and Booth, p. 240.

⁴⁹ Cleese and Booth, p. 242.

⁵⁰ According to Hobsbawm, during the Victorian era the scientific field of biology was linked to that of sociology, and Charles Darwin’s concept of evolution was used to justify racism and was “essential to a theoretically egalitarian bourgeois ideology, since it passed the blame from visible human inequalities from society to ‘nature’”. (Hobsbawm, p. 252.)

⁵¹ Cleese and Booth, p. 235.

⁵² Cleese and Booth, p. 139-140. The Major’s tangent reference to women refers to a previous discussion he has with Basil where they said a number of disparaging remarks regarding women and their intelligence. As with a discussion on Basil’s repressed sexuality, the coupling of Basil’s opinion on women with their representation in Victorian society would be a fascinating topic. However, because of my focus on Basil’s Anglophilia, this too remains beyond the scope of this thesis.

⁵³ Cleese and Booth, pp. 317-318.

⁵⁴ Bermel, p. 24.

⁵⁵ Cleese and Booth, p. 156.

⁵⁶ Cleese and Booth, p. 157.

⁵⁷ Cleese and Booth, p. 157.

⁵⁸ As suggested by Richard Thurnlow, “the growth of the underground tradition [in the National Front] was characterized by a large increase in racial attacks by hooligans against New Commonwealth immigrants during the late 1970s and early 1980s.” (Richard Thurnlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley’s Blackshirts to the National Front* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1998), p. 257.)

⁵⁹ Cleese and Booth, p. 195.

⁶⁰ Cleese and Booth, p. 6.

⁶¹ Cleese and Booth, p. 7.

⁶² Halsey, p. 57.

⁶³ Cleese and Booth, p. 7.

⁶⁴ Cleese and Booth, p. 8.

⁶⁵ Cleese and Booth, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Cleese and Booth, pp. 247-248.

⁶⁷ Cleese and Booth, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Basil also has a habit of insulting not only the supposed “crassness” of some of his guests but – on many occasions – also their intelligence.

⁶⁹ Cleese and Booth, p. 97.

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